

SPECIAL
EDITION

Golden Boot 2015 *The Votes are in – Meet the World's Best Player* | P.16

#1 in the Northern Hemisphere

Rugby League

WORLD

+

**Michael
SHENTON**

*"Why the Super League Player
Union Collapsed"*

INTERVIEW

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WARRIOR**

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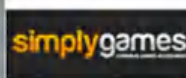
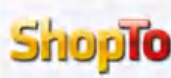
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ON THE COVER Sam Burgess battles through a torrential downpour at Salford's AJ Bell Stadium during England's World Cup warm-up loss to Italy on October 19, 2013. This striking and unique image won Sports Photograph of the year at the 2014 NAPA Awards.

CREDIT Alex Whitehead/SWPix.com



Meteoric Rise

→ It is with great pleasure that I present to you the winner of the 2015 Golden Boot: Johnathan Thurston.

The Australian has beaten off competition from Roger Tuivasa-Sheck and Zak Hardaker to land the sport's most prestigious individual accolade for a record third time, with over 90 per cent of the total votes.

It's hardly surprising when you consider the season he's had.

After helping Queensland regain their Origin crown — and sweeping the domestic awards scene, bagging a record fourth Dally M medal and the peer-voted RLPA award (also for a record fourth time) — the 32-year-old steered club side the Cowboys to a maiden NRL Premiership, slotting the winning field goal in the Grand Final and earning the Clive Churchill medal for man of the match. A substantial cherry on top of all that, the Golden Boot represents his sixth major achievement of the season, which, according to the Daily Telegraph

in Australia, defies pre-season odds of over 500,000/1. That means JT had more chance of being hit by a meteor than pulling off this miracle haul.

Amazing stuff from an amazing man. You can read our exclusive interview with him on page 16, and see who made the World XIII on page 24.

→ Sadly, one member of the Golden Boot panel was unable to cast their vote.

My talented colleague Gary Carter was attacked while in London for England's second test and, at the time of writing, remains critically ill in hospital. I sincerely hope he makes a full recovery.



Joe Whitley
Editor, **RLW**

My recommendations this month

Guess who's back (p52)

After a short stint in the 15-man code, Sam Burgess is back where he belongs. We look at his roller coaster spell in rugby union.



The Demise of League 13 (p56)

Castleford captain Michael Shenton, a talented writer, pens his latest column on the Super League player union collapse.



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Baskerville Shield report card, p26

We analyse England's historic series victory over the World's top-ranked team, New Zealand



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Rugby League WORLD

Issue 416, December 2015

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Sam Burgess is back, and he caused quite a stir in the 15-man code

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80 RYAN BRIERLEY

Read the Leigh star's honest end-of-season review

Random League

WITH NIGEL WISKAR



→ Who'd have thought these fresh-faced youths would make waves in global rugby of both codes?

This snap of the Burgess boys in 2008 shows their camaraderie and also some questionable fashion sense — pinstripe trousers with a t-shirt? They've beefed up considerably since, having eaten half the cattle in NSW. With George and Luke enjoying Sydney life it's up to Scapegoat Sam and powerhouse Tom to make the headlines this autumn.



LOST PICTURE SHOW



Christopher Hill



Andrew Flintoff

SEPARATED AT BIRTH

Remarkable Rugby League Resemblance

→ One is the model of consistency and application on the field.

The other's a gameshow irritant whose brilliance is now just a memory as he cavorts with James bleedin' Corden on perpetual repeat.



Completely unsubstantiated signing based loosely on something or indeed nothing

→ The England RU team will turn to fresh convert Kevin Sinfield to erase the bitter memory of their lamentable World Cup campaign (snigger).

Sinfield will mastermind an assault on the Six Nations from an armchair positioned on the half-way line. While he never moves from the seat, he is still quicker and more skilful than anyone else in the tournament. In the first minute he ignores a three-man overlap and boots the ball to the opposing full-back. The crowd roar and he is immediately awarded a knighthood.

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TIGERS JEAN JACKET

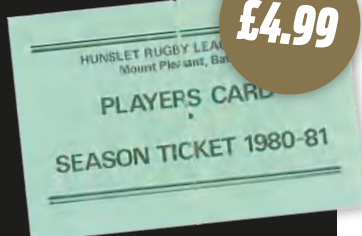
Get your flares on and give it the Status Quo look in deepest Cas with this cut-off denim Tigers jacket. Perfect for rocking all over the Wheldon Road.



£20

GET YOUR GREEN CARD

It's over 35 years old and is green and ranky...but enough of Kermit. How about treating yourself to a Hunslet player's season ticket from the 1980-81 season?



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BRONCOS BELT

From the state where mullets and bad fashion are almost compulsory comes this trouser-tightener. The description says 'distressed'. Like its potential owner then...



£25

→ James Graham and his England teammates emerged from the Olympic Stadium tunnel on the morning before the second Test to be greeted by schoolkids from Brighton and Southend.

Graham was first to come out and was treated like a cross between the Honey Monster and the messiah, with first a collective gasp then a stampede to be next to him. Our game's stars, coach Steve McNamara and his staff were mobbed — with several parents also desperate to get up close.

Not a northern accent to be heard and proof, if any were needed, that there is a passionate lust for the game and its personalities outside the traditional heartlands.



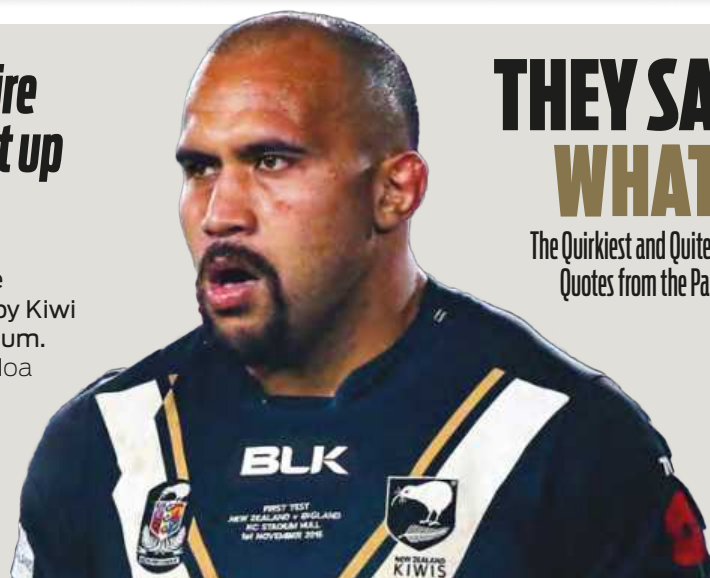
MOMENT OF THE MONTH

James Graham and England help spread the Rugby League gospel

“When you get hit by an entire country you’re bound to get up with a bit of a headache.”

→ BBC commentator Dave Woods is quick off the blocks when England’s James Roby is wiped out by Kiwi Sam Moa (right) in the first Test at Hull’s KC Stadium.

To confuse matters, former Airlie Birds enforcer Moa (now at Sydney Roosters) is of course from fierce rivals Tonga. He could line up alongside other players like Denis Tibets, Sierra Leone Pryce, Chad Townsend, Jordan Turner, Robbie Nepal, Georgia Burgess and Sudan Sarginson. Sorry, there’s no slot for turncoat Israel Folau.



THEY SAID WHAT?!

The Quirkiest and Quite Quixotic Quotes from the Past Month

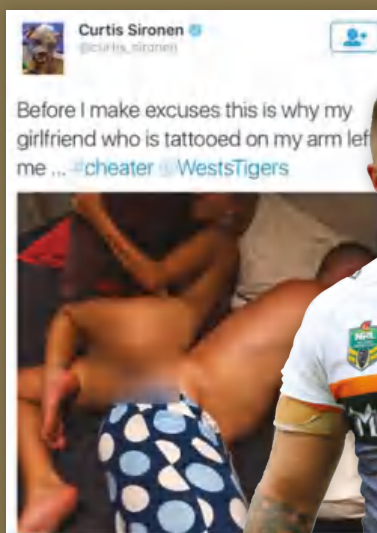
TWIT OF THE MONTH

The best (and worst) of RL on social media

→ It’s safe to say Wests Tigers player Curtis Sironen has lived in the shadow of his dad, former Balmain and Kangaroo Test star Paul.

For one brief moment all that changed as Sironen junior became centre of attention. His Twitter account was hacked and a photo posted of him in an uncompromising position with a naked woman. Curtis’s profile was changed to ‘professional cheater living the life’ with the accompanying photo a mangy dog. Oh dear.

Still, at least he hasn’t got his girlfriend’s name tattooed on his arm. Oops, he has.





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PICK UP A GOOD READ

Matt King 04.04.04:

Matt King's autobiography is only £13.99, all profits to the RFL Benevolent Fund.

13 Inspirations:

Tells the story of some of Rugby League's greatest legends, all profits to RL Cares.



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Hadfield's HALF DOZEN

This month: The best Kiwi imports in history



❶ CEC MOUNTFORD

The Blackball Bullet, as he was known in reference to his small home-town on the West Coast of the South Island, joined Wigan in 1946. In five years there, he won everything as a player — a devastating running stand-off — and repeated it as a coach with Warrington. A major influence on the game when he returned to New Zealand, he was also, more surprisingly, involved with Blackpool Borough. Never known, however, as the Blackpool Bullet.

❷ GRAEME WEST

A towering figure in the game, in more ways than one, he led Wigan as they assumed their position of dominance in the game.

Nobody ever worked harder for the club off the field and Maurice Lindsay called him their all-time best signing. Can still be sighted, if you are very lucky, driving a taxi in the town.

❸ DEAN BELL

If West has a rival for that Best Signing accolade, it must surely be 'Mean Dean'.

An outside back with genuine pace in his youth, he became the



❹ JAMES LEULUAI

Perhaps the most significant piece of signing business of the early-80s was Hull's recruitment of Gary Kemble, Dane O'Hara and James Leuluai, later joined by Fred Ah Kuoi.

Of that quartet, it was Leuluai who was the biggest talent and the biggest success.

He was also the spearhead of a small army of Leuluai's to play in England.

❺ MARK BROADHURST

Meanwhile, on the other side of Hull, KR brought in one of the real hard men of Rugby League.

Fitted in at Rovers as though



he'd arrived on a trawler.

One of the nicest blokes you could wish to meet off the field (aren't they always?) he once found me wandering aimlessly around Christchurch and insisted on taking me home for dinner with the family.

❻ STACEY JONES

If there was ever such a thing as these marquee signings we hear so much about, it was surely Catalan Dragons landing the world's outstanding scrum-half to lead them into Super League.

If that didn't prove that they meant business, then nothing would, and, despite injury eventually cutting short his career, he was an inspirational presence for the new club. **RLW**



“If there was ever a marquee signing, it was surely Catalan Dragons landing the world's outstanding scrum-half Stacey Jones to lead them into Super League.”

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BRETT KENNY

Dream Thirteen

The 1985 Golden Boot winner selects his all-time dream lineup from former team-mates

1

FULLBACK


GARRY JACK

New South Wales & Australia

He was a brilliant running fullback, but was strong in defence, too. Plus he had great longevity at international level.

2

WINGER

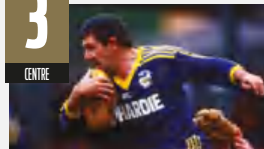

MICHAEL O'CONNOR

New South Wales & Australia

He was a stylish player, good on his feet, and was also a great goalkicker. A few players took him close but O'Connor edged it.

3

CENTRE


MICK CRONIN

Parramatta, NSW & Australia

A very tough and strong player. When I came into the Parramatta side he took me under his wing and taught me a tremendous amount.

4

CENTRE


STEVE ROGERS

New South Wales & Australia

Another great player who was so agile and quick on his feet. He took me under his wing on the Kangaroos' 1982 tour of Europe.

5

WINGER

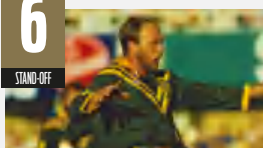

ERIC GROTHE

Parramatta, NSW & Australia

This was a very simple choice – he was without a doubt the most formidable attacking winger of his time.

6

STAND-OFF

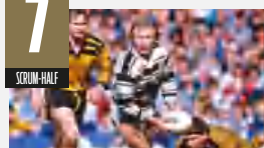

WALLY LEWIS

Australia

He was definitely the supreme player of his generation and I loved playing both with and against him.

7

SCrum-HALF

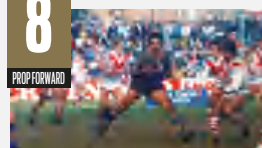

PETER STERLING

Parramatta, NSW & Australia

He wasn't the quickest in the world, but certainly the smartest with a great kicking game. This was an easy choice.

8

PROP FORWARD

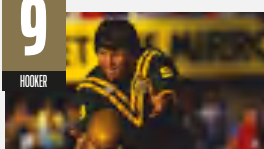

ARTHUR BEETSON

Parramatta & Australia

My career coincided with his only in reserve grade. Even so I couldn't fail to pick Arthur as one of the best I've played with.

9

HOOKER


ROYCE SIMMONS

New South Wales & Australia

A tremendous tourist in 1986. He was ultra-competitive and played in every Test. He always pushed himself to the edge.

10

PROP FORWARD

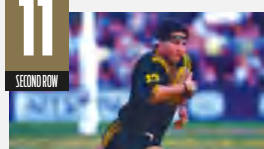

STEVE ROACH

New South Wales & Australia

He gets my vote at a pinch over three or four others. He had it all – he was very enthusiastic and very highly skilled.

11

SECOND ROW


WAYNE PEARCE

New South Wales & Australia

An incredible trainer and one of the fittest players I ever played with. He was a tackling machine. What a player.

12

SECOND ROW

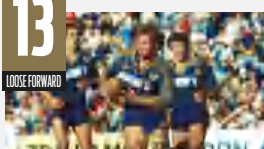

NOEL CLEAL

New South Wales & Australia

A phenomenon with the ball who could terrorise defences. He had great footwork but could also hand off tacklers like few others.

13

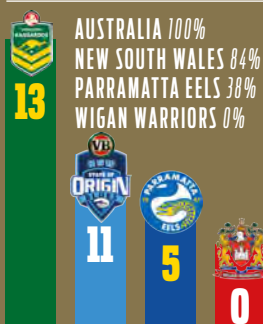
LOOSE FORWARD


RAY PRICE

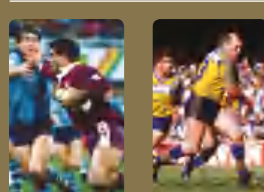
Parramatta, NSW & Australia

We called him Mr Perpetual Motion because he never stopped. Not only that, he was a very inspirational leader.

WHERE THEY PLAYED



TWO NEAR MISSES



MAL MENINGA Australia (L)
BOB O'REILLY Eels, NSW, Aus (R)

WHO'S UP NEXT?



SHAUN LUNT Issue 417 (out Dec 18th)
 The hooker picks from spells at Leeds, Huddersfield & Hull Kingston Rovers

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 MARTIN TAUPAU

Getting To Know

The New Zealand and Manly Sea Eagles enforcer on fears, favourite food and friends



TAUPAU TAKES AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE HAKA

If you could take anything from England back to New Zealand, what would it be?

One thing that really stood out for me against Leeds Rhinos were the fans.

I've never experienced an atmosphere quite like the Leeds Rhinos fans. From the beginning to the end of the game they never stopped chanting, they have a chant for every individual player and the energy is real. They're a community and that's what I really like.

I was saying to a few players after the game, could you imagine if we had fans like that at the ANZ stadium?

It stood out to me just how much they love Rugby League.

What is your most treasured possession?

At the moment I would say my dog tags. I've had them for over a year now, and they all have my two kids' full name and their date of birth on both sides, and on the same chain another has Team Kapow.

Team Kapow is something I always use when I put something on social media and that's me representing myself and my family wherever I go. My kids are my drive so I'd say that.

What is your biggest fear or phobia?

I'm not a fan of creepy crawlies at all.

I don't do cockroaches — I can't believe I've just told you that! They just make me shiver, especially when it's hot over in Australia because you can't contain them. I just wish we could get rid of them.

If you could get into a time machine where would you go?

Considering I'm a nineties kid I would like to go back to either the seventies or eighties. I love my old school music so I'd like to go back and enjoy all the disco music. I'd love to go back to either of those decades.

Do you have any hobbies?

I try and play a bit of golf, but to be honest I like to try everything. At the minute I'm trying to get into paddleboarding.

I'm looking at purchasing myself a paddleboard for the summer back in Sydney.

It's something I'm looking forward to doing, but I have kids so I'm always driving around doing something.

I'm a father and I love to be the big kid.

→ Who is your best friend in Rugby League?

I've got to be careful with this one. I've got a lot of mates everywhere. I've obviously played for the Kiwis, I've represented Samoa, played for the Tigers and the Bulldogs in the past. That's what's amazing about Rugby League, it's why you're in the game, to create friends and memories. I won't pin-point who but I have a lot of close friends in the game.



What would you like your last ever meal to be?

Can I say a whole pig on a stick? If that's allowed I'll say that so I can hold it out for as long as I can! I'd have it with taro, which is like a sweet potato.

What song do you listen to more than any other?

There isn't a particular song I listen to. I just listen to everything, from Samoan music to Elton John from Abba to Boyz II Men. Do you remember B*Witched from the nineties? I've got that on my iPad, there's a bit of 5ive too. It's a very wide variety of music! There's a lot of British music in there, but you can't leave it out. I remember Top of the Pops back in the day and listening to all the new British bands coming out.

Do you have any party tricks?

I can blow bubbles with my tongue — does that count?

Will we ever see you in Super League?

I'd never say never to that one, especially after experiencing the fans at Leeds Rhinos — they were outstanding.

What is your idea of the perfect day off?

I'd go paddleboarding. I could take my daughter as she's old enough to jump on the board with me, but I'd probably go on my own and get out on the water, I love doing that.

If you weren't a Rugby League player, what would you be?

I would probably be doing something within the sports industry. Powerlifting, a personal trainer or even open a gym. It would be something that would keep me active; I'm not one to stay at home. I'm always constantly on the road or doing something. 



LIVING LEGEND

Johnathan Thurston has cemented his status as one of the sport's all-time greats after cruising to a record third Golden Boot

WORDS JAMES O'BRIEN PHOTOGRAPHY INSIGHT CREATIVE, NRL PHOTOS

GOLDEN BOOT 2015 THE FINAL RESULT

- 1 Johnathan Thurston (Australia)
- 2 Roger Tuivasa-Sheck (New Zealand)
- 3 Zak Hardaker (England)
- 4 Cameron Smith (Australia)
- 5 Corey Parker (Australia)

ALSO NOMINATED

Jesse Bromwich (New Zealand), Ben Hunt (Australia), Shaun Johnson (New Zealand), Simon Mannering (New Zealand)



In an era of Australian Rugby League that boasts freak talents such as Greg Inglis and Billy Slater, it takes something special to stand out on your own.

When it comes to performing in big games and pulling off match-winning plays, there is nobody better in Rugby League than Johnathan Thurston. He has been the heartbeat of the Queensland side that have dominated State of Origin over the past decade and delivered a man-of-the-match performance as Australia hammered defending champions New Zealand 34-2 in the 2013 World Cup – but at the end of his career he will likely be remembered for the way he inspired his beloved North Queensland Cowboys to their first-ever Premiership in 2015.

Kicking the winning field goal in one of the most thrilling Grand Finals in NRL history would be enough to secure your place in club folklore on its own, but it was Thurston's contributions throughout the year that made him a worthy winner of the Golden Boot for a record-breaking third time.

The award caps off a truly memorable year for the 32-year-old half-back, who as well as becoming the first player to win an NRL Premiership, the Dally M Medal, Clive Churchill Medal and Golden Boot in the same season, married long-time partner Samantha Lynch at the start of November.

"It's a little surreal," Thurston told **RLW**.

"I'm still trying to come to terms with winning the award.

"It's obviously been a big year on and off the field and to finish it off with the Golden Boot is very special.

"There's obviously a lot of great players in both hemispheres and to be voted as the best is very humbling. I'm still a little bit lost for words.

"When I look at the previous winners – like Locky (Darren Lockyer) and Joey (Andrew Johns) who are legends of our game – to be the first person to receive this award for a third time is very humbling and I'm blown away that people see me in that regard.

"It's no doubt a year to remember, being a part of the first Premiership-winning side of the North Queensland»

Cowboys and obviously winning the other individual awards as well. I've also got married in the off-season so it's been quite a big year on and off the field."

That is quite the understatement but typical of a genuinely humble and likeable bloke.

"What you see is what you get," wife Sam told me.

"He's fairly similar off the field to what he is on the field. When it comes to family he's passionate, loving and funny. I suppose the only difference is on the field he's really competitive and off the field he's really relaxed and laid back.

"At the end of the day, he wears his heart on his sleeve — he's quite emotional about his footy and quite emotional about his family. He's your normal, everyday guy and so humble — you'd never be able to tell he's the best player in the world.

"I don't know how he deals with it but he never lets it get to him — he's very down to earth. It's a credit to him, how he copes with it all."

Thurston had to dig deep into his mental reserves in the Grand Final, which sensationally swung back in North Queensland's favour when Kyle Feldt went over in the right corner on the final hooter to level the scores at 16-16. While everyone associated with the Cowboys inside Sydney's ANZ Stadium went wild, one man had to get his breath back before lining up the most important kick of his career.

"I was just trying to compose myself," Thurston recalled, laughing.

"I obviously knew there was a goal kick coming up and if I'd run over straight away to take that kick I don't think I would have made the distance because my legs were like jelly.

"It took me about five minutes to compose myself and get the lactic acid build-up out of my legs.

"It was pure joy when he (Feldt) went over and it's what dreams are made of to win a game by kicking it from the sideline, but it just didn't come around enough and hit the post. It was quite an emotional ride.

"I didn't feel nervous at all before the kick. It was like I was the only person on the field — everything was just zoned out. The day before at training I was striking them really well from that exact spot. I had a bit of a breeze at my back so I knew my hook

wouldn't come around as much so I tried to drill it lower and harder at the upright — you can see it was trying to come back but the wind pushes it back to the post."

Some players seem destined to be a Grand Final match-winner and there was still a sense Thurston would have another opportunity to kick his side to glory.

A noticeably emotional Thurston needed picking up by his team-mates after missing the conversion and minutes later he repaid them with the most valuable of golden points to break Brisbane hearts.

"To win a comp is what you set out to do every year so to win it in that style and be a part of the first-ever side to do that for North Queensland is something I'll never forget," the Cowboys co-captain said.

"It was a really quick play of the ball from James Tamou and it felt like I had an eternity to take the field goal.

"I hit it flush, looked up and it just went straight through.

"Everyone went ballistic, I went nuts and it was just mayhem.

"Getting married was one of the happiest days of my life but kicking the winning field goal in the Grand Final is right up there with it. I might be divorced after a week now!"

After the initial celebrations died down, Thurston got the chance to embrace his wife and two-year-old daughter Frankie, who was wearing a replica Cowboys jersey.

"That was special," he said.

"They ride the waves of emotion as much as you do so it was very important to have family there.

"To be able to share that photo on the middle of the ground after the game with my eldest daughter Frankie is something I'll never forget."

It was all smiles in the end but as the drama unfolded in the closing stages, Sam was left fearing the worst.

"Since we've had kids I don't get to sit down and watch too many games, even the Grand Final I was chasing Frankie up and down the stairs trying to make sure she didn't hurt herself," she said.

"But for the last five minutes of the game I was watching intently. When he missed the goal I was thinking about what I'd say to him and that I'd have to put him on suicide watch!

"I was horrified because I thought »

“There’s obviously a lot of great players in both hemispheres and to be voted as the best is very humbling. I’m still a little bit lost for words.”





2015 VOTING PANEL

Australia

Malcolm Andrews (League Express)
John Davidson (League Express)
Brett Kenny (1985 winner)
Wally Lewis (1984 winner)
Steve Mascord (Rugby League World)
Adrian Prossenko (Sydney Morning Herald)
Phillip Rothfield (Daily Telegraph)
Andrew Voss (Fox Sports)
Brad Walter (Sydney Morning Herald)

England

Aaron Bower (Guardian)
Eorl Crabtree (Rugby League World)
Dave Hadfield (Independent)
Ian Ladyman (Daily Mail)
Ian Laybourn (Press Association)
James O'Brien (Press Association)
Richard de la Riviere (League Express)
Martyn Sadler (League Express)
Garry Schofield (1990 winner)
Gareth Walker (Daily Mirror)
Joe Whitley (Rugby League World)
Nigel Wiskar (Daily Mirror)
Dave Woods (BBC)

France

Louis Bonnery (beIN Sports)

New Zealand

Richard Barnett (Former Kiwi international)
Michael Burgess (NZ Herald)
Will Evans (Rugby League World)
Daryl Halligan (Former Kiwi international)
Hugh McGahan (1987 winner)

HOW IT WORKS

Each of our judges were asked to nominate up to five players for the Golden Boot award, which is designed to crown the best player in world Rugby League. First-choice players received five points, second choice were given four, third choice got three, and so on. The votes were counted electronically (four times!) for ultimate accuracy.

PAST WINNERS

1984 WALLY LEWIS
1985 BRETT KENNY
1986 GARRY JACK
1987 HUGH MCGAHAN & PETER STERLING
1988 ELLERY HANLEY
1989 MAL MENINGA
1990 GARRY SCHOFIELD
1999 ANDREW JOHNS
2000 BRAD FITTLER
2001 ANDREW JOHNS (2)
2002 STACEY JONES
2003 DARREN LOCKYER
2004 ANDREW FARRELL
2005 ANTHONY MINICHELLO
2006 DARREN LOCKYER (2)
2007 CAMERON SMITH
2008 BILLY SLATER
2009 GREG INGLIS
2010 BENJI MARSHALL
2011 JOHNATHAN THURSTON
2012 KEVIN SINFIELD
2013 JOHNATHAN THURSTON (2)
2014 SHAUN JOHNSON
2015 JOHNATHAN THURSTON (3)

AGAINST THE ODDS

The likelihood of Johnathan Thurston pulling off Rugby League's six-leg miracle run (Golden Boot, RLPA award for best player, winning the NRL Premiership, Clive Churchill medal, Dally M Medal, State of Origin series victory) is the same as your chances of being hit by a meteor.

The Australian Daily Telegraph calculated that odds of Thurston pulling off this incredible feat were a combined 524,000/1 as recently as the end of last season. Proof, if it were needed, that we're witnessing a once-in-a-generation talent.





that would haunt him for the rest of his life if they went on to lose the game. When he kicked that field goal it was more relief than anything."

The nail-biting victory not only lifted North Queensland's 'finals curse' but has brought some much-needed cheer to the long-suffering region.

"I've seen first hand the hard work that not only the coaching staff but the players and certainly the front office put in day in, day out and the sacrifices everyone makes at the club," Thurston said.

"To be a part of history is something I'd dreamed of since I arrived at the club. I love the club and would do anything for the club. It's been extremely huge for the region. I took the trophy to Mareeba which is maybe 500km north of Townsville and talked to a couple of schools. I think the trophy has done nearly 16,000km of travel around North Queensland.

"It's been taken to different communities to give students and fans the opportunity to have their photo taken with the trophy. We obviously cover a huge footprint and it's great that we can take the holy grail of Rugby League to these remote communities and give the fans something to smile about because they've had a lot of heartache over the years with natural disasters, including cyclones which have wiped out communities, and a massive drought throughout the region. To take the trophy up to these communities and put a smile on people's faces that are doing it tough is what Rugby League is all about."

The Cowboys' reward for beating Brisbane is a trip to Headingley early next year to face Super League champions Leeds in the World Club Challenge, an event Thurston missed out on in 2005 after leaving Canterbury following their 2004

Grand Final success.

"From all reports last year the World Club Series was a huge success so to be a part of it is something I'm really looking forward to," he added.

"I've only played in the northern hemisphere in an Australian jersey so I'm looking forward to going over there and playing in a Cowboys jersey against Leeds, who've obviously been a powerhouse in Super League for a number of years. Hopefully the fans pack the stadium out and it's a good, entertaining brand of football."

There is little doubt Headingley will be sold out on February 21 and a large portion of the crowd will be there to see Thurston, who stopped short of completely ruling out a spell in Super League later in his career.

"I think it'd just be too hard to uproot the family and take them to the other side of the world," he stressed.

"I've got two young daughters now so they're going to be a big part of the decision-making for me and my wife in the future. "I can't see myself uprooting the family to go over there... but never say never."

Rugby League fans in England can but dream about the world's best player lighting up Super League.

The NRL's star man is "still riding the Grand Final high" according to his wife and it might be a while before he comes back down after a year which has even left Sam stunned.

"He just continues to amaze me," she said.

"He seems to get better with age.

"I told him he should probably retire after this year because it doesn't get any better than the year he's had!"

On the evidence Thurston has provided so far during his glittering career, it would be no surprise to see the Australia and Queensland half-back clean up again in 2016. **RLW**

Could there have ever been a more devoted Rugby League fan than Arthur Whitmore?

I caught up with him way back in 1987 when his beloved Western Suburbs Magpies were about to move from the famous Lidcombe Oval out to Campbelltown south-west of Sydney. He was an old man back then and had seen more than his fair share of the encounters in the 'Greatest Game of All'.

Indeed, he had seen every single game played by the Magpies since the start of the Premiership in 1908 — except for two years during World War II when he was up in the Owen Stanley Ranges of New Guinea fighting the Japanese.

He had seen all the touring sides, too, with such legends as the French fullback Puig-Aubert and the Chanticleers' terrifying backrowers Edouard Ponsinet and Elie Brousse, and the likes of British greats Jim Lomas, 'Big' Ben Gronow, Jonty Parkin, Jim Sullivan and Billy Boston.

He had also seen the celebrated 'Rorke's Drift Test' in 1914, in which the England side reduced to 10 men held off the Aussies. As one does with old fans I asked which player was the greatest he had ever seen.

"Everyone asks me that question," Arthur replied.

"And there is only one answer. Dally Messenger. He was in a class of his own. Mind you, he was a greedy fella. He wouldn't pass the ball. But he didn't need to. He was better than anyone else on the field."

Nevertheless, Arthur wouldn't let the moment pass without a plug for a few of great Magpies halves, namely Vic Hey, Jimmy Craig, Keith Holman, Arthur Summons and Tommy Raudonikis, all of whom toured Britain, with Hey returning to play for Leeds. I thought of Arthur Whitmore's comments in the aftermath of this year's NRL Grand Final, and the subsequent hundreds of stories heaping praise on Johnathan Thurston.

Was Arthur watching from that great Rugby League pitch in the sky?

For, despite what the fellows in their tweed jackets with leather on the elbows tell us, I think Rugby League is actually the game they play in Heaven. I don't think his opinion would have changed.

GOLDEN GREAT

Malcolm Andrews has seen all the great half-backs in action over the past six decades. And he has no doubt who has been the greatest in the world. Move over Alex Murphy. Stand aside Peter Sterling. And step back all but one of the other legends...

Dally M had long since retired when I watched my first game of Rugby League. But I did see him once make a ceremonial kick-off at the Sydney Cricket Ground at the start of an Ashes Test. He was a very old gentleman, dressed immaculately in a grey suit and wearing a snappy trilby.

When he booted the ball it flew off his black brogues, curling end-over-end before finding touch a metre from the tryline in front of the SCG 'Hill'.

What a sweet kick from the man they dubbed 'The Master'!

Head held high, with a faint smile flickering across his lips, Dally M then strode off the pitch to the roar of 60,000-odd fans.

And I thought of the story about how he had tried to intimidate the English star Albert Goldthorpe in a 1908 match between the Australians and Hunslet when Messenger booted a 75-metre field goal which ultimately won the match 11-10.

The British sportswriters accused Dally M of showing off.

Well, if you could, you would. Wouldn't you?

Thurston may not have the raw talent of Dally M. Not only was Messenger the master of his craft, but

FACT FILE

DOB 23/04/1983 (32)
HEIGHT 179cm (5ft 10in)
WEIGHT 85kg (13st 3lb)
CLUBS Canterbury Bulldogs (2002-04); North Queensland Cowboys (2005-15)
NRL APPEARANCES 268
TESTS 32 (2006-15)
ORIGINS 33 (2005-15)
AWARDS Golden Boot (2011, 2013, 2015); Dally M Medal (2005, 2007, 2014 & 2015); Dally M Halfback of the Year (2005, 2007, 2009 & 2015); Dally M Five-eighth of the Year (2012, 2013 & 2014); Provan Summons Medal (2014 & 2015); Clive Churchill Medal (2015); Harry Sunderland Medal (2008); Wally Lewis Medal (2008); Players Association Player of the Year (2005, 2013, 2014 & 2015)
And much more to come...

he forced rule changes because of a few of his innovations.

And there is no doubt that his decision to turn his back on rugby union in 1907 ensured that the establishment of the 13-a-side code would be successful. However you could never accuse Thurston of being greedy.

It is not in his nature. This year he scored only four tries himself in NRL matches — but helped set up no less than 33 for his North Queensland team-mates. It was the most by any player in the Premiership and an incredible 11 more than the next best, the Dragons' Benji Marshall.

As a kid, Holman was my hero. I thought he was the nearest thing to God. Then brash young St Helens scrum half Alex Murphy toured Australia in 1958.

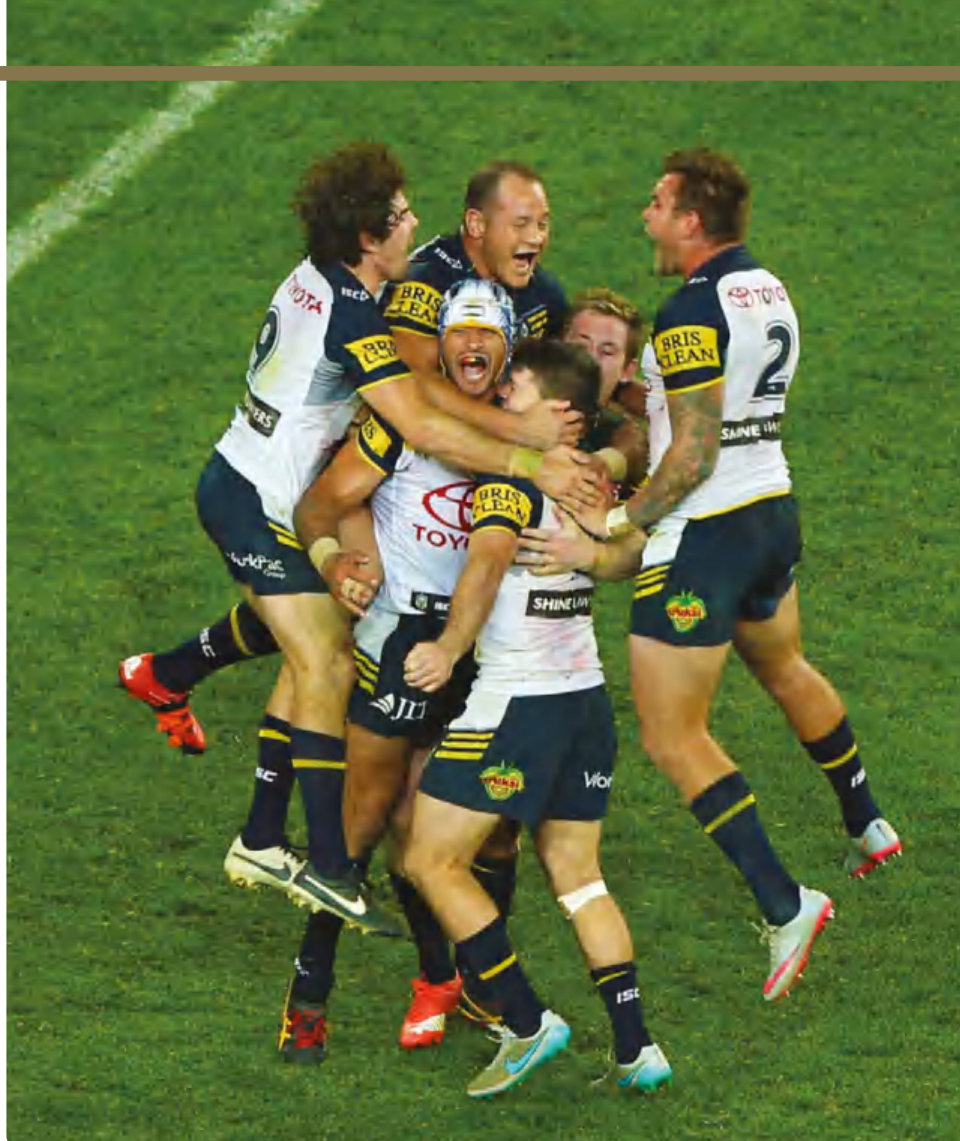
He was introduced to Holman at a horse race meeting in Sydney.

His host pulled Murph aside and said: "Alex, I'd like to introduce you to the world's greatest half-back."

Murphy snapped back immediately: "How do you know he's the best? He's never played against me."

'Yappy' Holman frowned: "You'll keep, son!"

In the First Test Holman made



Murphy look stupid, prompting Britain's captain Alan Prescott to pull the kid aside with some great advice: "Alex, Holman is getting old. You're running on young legs. Don't chase him trying to prove yourself... you must make him chase you."

It is history how Murphy took the advice of his club and Test captain.

Britain won the remaining two Tests and Holman's international career was over. Until the past couple of years the only half I have seen that could equal Murphy was Australia's Peter Sterling. Sterlo had — and still has — a remarkable rugby brain.

He reads the game as if he was the one who wrote every coaching manual ever published. I never thought I would ever see the likes of Murphy and Sterling at No 7 again — and we have had some great ones such as Andrew 'Joey' Johns, Allan 'Alfie' Langer and Cooper Cronk.

But Thurston's performances in the past two seasons has completely turned my thinking upside down.

He has won every honour possible from Golden Boots to Dally M Medals to the elusive NRL Premiership, and the associated Clive Churchill Medal as Grand Final Man of the Match.

His efforts in North Queensland's dramatic Grand Final success in early October highlighted his mastery of the sport.

JT kicks the ball as sweetly as the elderly Dally M did all those years ago.

His passes, both the short offloads, many of them remarkable flicks behind his back, to the long cut-out efforts that spiral halfway across the pitch are worth the cost of entry at the gate to any match at which he is playing. But it his demeanour off the pitch that sets him apart.

That broad grin which beams from under his headgear and the infectious laugh, more than a chuckle but not quite a throaty guffaw, sums up the genuine Johnathan Thurston.

You see him and hear him and you want to laugh along with him.

The chortle, of course, masks a chronic shyness.

His wife, Samantha Lynch, who met him when she was in charge of corporate marketing for the Cowboys, explained it was apparently months before he summoned up the courage to ask her out on their first date.

She reckoned it was getting to the stage where she thought she would have to make the first move and

propose a romantic dinner.

He asked her to marry him in November 2012 while they were on a post-season holiday in New York. They were sitting on a bench in Central Park when he produced an impressive diamond ring.

Yes... yes... a thousand times yes!

The kid from North Queensland with the infectious smile didn't stop there. He recently arranged for the couple to be married on the anniversary of their engagement.

They kept the ceremony secret before inviting a few family members and friends to Hamilton Island on Queensland's Great Barrier Reef.

JT calls Samantha his 'Rock'.

She knows him so well.

Especially his reaction to several refereeing blunders which cost the Cowboys success in finals matches in recent years.

"The last couple of years have been the most intense I've seen him in the eight or nine years we've been together," Lynch said.

Ah, yes, then there is the headgear, which has become the Thurston trademark. After each and every match he gives away his headgear to a young fan watching from the terraces. The gesture had its beginnings five years ago as a 'thank you' to young Cowboys supporters.

But now he often singles out a kid supporting the opposition team.

After all, it is the great game of Rugby League he is promoting — not just one club. In this year's NRL preliminary final he handed his headgear to a stunned youngster wearing the colours of the Melbourne Storm.

We reckon the photo of little Oscar and JT will hang on the former's bedroom wall for years to come... and in decades to come Oscar will be sitting in a rocking chair and telling his grandchildren about that night.

Thurston has so far given away an incredible \$40,000 (£19,000) worth of headgear, more than what his actual sponsorship with manufacturer Madison is worth. Madison reckons they would still be happy if the costs doubled. No one will be surprised if some lucky young Leeds Rhinos fan goes home from Headingley in February with JT's headgear.

And, even if the Rhinos are beaten in the World Club Challenge, that youngster will be over the moon. 

World Thirteen

1

FULLBACK

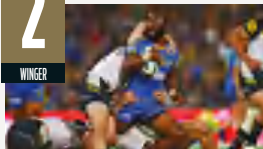


Roger Tuivasa-Sheck
Sydney Roosters, New Zealand

DOB 05/06/1993 **H** 5ft 10in **W** 93kg
2015 STATS 27 apps, 12 tries, 15 assists,
606 carries, 6517 metres, 16 line breaks

2

WINGER

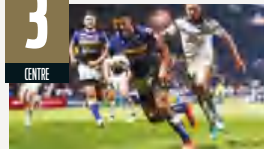


Semi Radradra
Parramatta Eels, Fiji

DOB 13/06/1992 **H** 6ft 2in **W** 105kg
2015 STATS 18 apps, 24 tries, 286
carries, 3075 metres, 25 line breaks

3

CENTRE



Kallum Watkins
Leeds Rhinos, England

DOB 12/03/1991 **H** 6ft 1in **W** 90kg
2015 STATS 36 apps, 21 tries, 10 assists,
386 carries, 403 tackles, 108 tackle busts

4

CENTRE

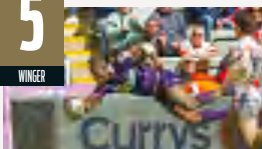


James Roberts
Gold Coast Titans

DOB 03/03/1993 **H** 6ft 0in **W** 85kg
2015 STATS 24 apps, 16 tries, 1 goal,
253 carries, 2528 metres, 289 tackles

5

WINGER

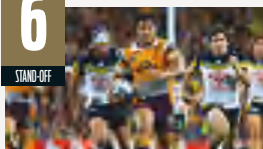


Jermaine McGillvary
Huddersfield Giants, England

DOB 16/05/1988 **H** 5ft 10in **W** 94kg
2015 STATS 33 apps, 27 tries, 1 assist,
465 carries, 3888 metres, 98 tackle busts

6

STAND-OFF

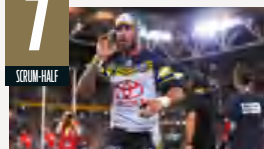


Anthony Milford
Brisbane Broncos, Samoa

DOB 11/07/1994 **H** 6ft 3in **W** 83kg
2015 STATS 27 apps, 13 tries, 14 assists,
3 goals, 3 field-goals, 337 tackles

7

SCrum-HALF



Johnathan Thurston
NQ Cowboys, Australia, QLD

DOB 25/04/1983 **H** 5ft 10in **W** 85kg
2015 STATS 25 apps, 4 tries, 33 assists,
345 carries, 373 tackles, 93 goals

8

PROP FORWARD



Matthew Scott
NQ Cowboys, Australia, QLD

DOB 30/07/1985 **H** 6ft 1in **W** 108kg
2015 STATS 25 apps, 3 tries, 352 carries,
3454 metres, 716 tackles, 16 offloads

9

HOOVER



Cameron Smith
Melbourne Storm, Australia, QLD

DOB 18/06/1983 **H** 6ft 1in **W** 90kg
2015 STATS 25 apps, 1 try, 71 goals, 1125
tackles, 21 offloads, 188 carries

10

PROP FORWARD



Jesse Bromwich
Melbourne Storm, New Zealand

DOB 03/05/1989 **H** 6ft 4in **W** 114kg
2015 STATS 26 apps, 3 tries, 435 carries,
4118 metres, 875 tackles, 27 offloads

11

SECOND ROW

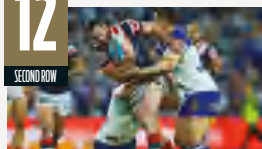


Josh Jackson
Canterbury B'dogs, NSW, Australia

DOB 08/01/1991 **H** 5ft 22in **W** 99kg
2015 STATS 23 apps, 2 tries, 284
carries, 2345 metres, 834 tackles

12

SECOND ROW

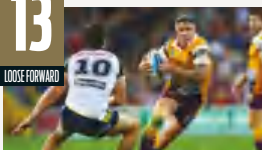


Boyd Cordner
Sydney Roosters, NSW, Australia

DOB 09/06/1992 **H** 6ft 2in **W** 102kg
2015 STATS 25 apps, 7 tries, 313 carries,
722 tackles, 3069 metres, 3 line breaks

13

LOOSE FORWARD



Corey Parker
Brisbane Broncos, QLD, Australia

DOB 05/05/1982 **H** 6ft 2in **W** 102kg
2015 STATS 24 apps, 3 tries, 389
carries, 3421 metres, 828 tackles

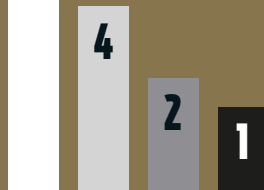
NATIONALITIES

7
AUSTRALIA 54%
ENGLAND 15%
NEW ZEALAND 15%
FIJI, SAMOA 8%



AGE BREAKDOWN

6
22-25 47%
30+ 30%
26-29 15%
21 & UNDER 8%



Did Our Panel Make the
Right Decision? Let us
know what you think...

Twitter
Twitter.com/RLWorld

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Instagram.com/RLWorld

HOW IT WORKS Our panel was asked to select the strongest global lineup of the year. Each voter listed a top five in each position, with their first choice earning five points, their second four, their third three and so on. The maximum points any player could earn in one position was 140. In the event of a tie, the player with the most first-place votes wins.

FULLBACKS

- 1 Roger Tuivasa-Sheck (New Zealand) **116pts**
- 2 Zak Hardaker (England) **89pts**
- 3 Greg Inglis (Australia) **40pts**
- 4 James Tedesco (Australia) **26pts**
- 5 Darius Boyd (Australia) **23pts**

ALSO NOMINATED Lachlan Coote (Australia), Josh Dugan (Australia), Brett Morris (Australia), Matt Moylan (Australia), Brett Stewart (Australia)

WINGERS

- 1 Semi Radradra (Fiji) **91pts**
- 2 Jermaine McGillvary (England) **41pts**
- 3 Ryan Hall (England) **33pts**
- 4 Shaun Kenny-Dowall (New Zealand) **27pts**
- 5 Jason Nightingale (New Zealand) **26pts**

ALSO NOMINATED Curtis Rona (New Zealand), Valentine Holmes (Australia), Manu Vatuvei (New Zealand), Joe Burgess (England), Kyle Feldt (Australia)

CENTRES

- 1 Kallum Watkins (England) **68pts**
- 2 James Roberts (Australia) **45pts**
- 3 Blake Ferguson (Australia) **36pts**
- 4 Michael Jennings (Australia) **19pts**
- 5 Dean Whare (New Zealand) **16pts**

ALSO NOMINATED Jack Reed (England), Kane Linnett (Australia), Josh Morris (Australia), Jamie Lyon (Australia), Dylan Walker (Australia), Will Chambers (Australia)

STAND-OFFS

- 1 Anthony Milford (Samoa) **72pts**
- 2 Michael Morgan (Australia) **70pts**
- 3 Johnathan Thurston (Australia) **50pts**
- 4 Blake Austin (Australia) **36pts**
- 5 Gareth Widdop (England) **33pts**

ALSO NOMINATED James Maloney (Australia), Danny Brough (Scotland), Jack Bird (Australia), Kieran Foran (New Zealand), Kevin Sinfield (England), Moses Mbye (Australia)

SCRUM-HALVES

- 1 Johnathan Thurston (Australia) **90pts**
- 2 Ben Hunt (Australia) **63pts**
- 3 Cooper Cronk (Australia) **49pts**
- 4 Shaun Johnson (New Zealand) **44pts**
- 5 Luke Gale (England) **24pts**

ALSO NOMINATED Danny McGuire (England), Daly Cherry-Evans (Australia), Benji Marshall (New Zealand), Mitchell Pearce (Australia), Trent Hodkinson (Australia)

PROP FORWARDS

- 1 Jesse Bromwich (New Zealand) **69pts**
- 2 Matt Scott (Australia) **55pts**
- 3 James Graham (England) **43pts**
- 4 J Waerea-Hargreaves (New Zealand) **41pts**
- 5 Aaron Woods (Australia) **34pts**

ALSO NOMINATED Adam Cuthbertson (Australia), Alex Walmsley (England), Adam Blair (New Zealand), Ben Matulino (New Zealand), James Tamou (Australia)

HOOKERS

- 1 Cameron Smith (Australia) **82pts**
- 2 James Roby (England) **49pts**
- 3 Issac Luke (New Zealand) **48pts**
- 4 Jake Granville (Australia) **43pts**
- 5 Michael Ennis (Australia) **26pts**

ALSO NOMINATED Josh Hodgson (England), Andrew McCullough (Australia), Jake Friend (Australia), Paul Aiton (Papua New Guinea), Robbie Farah (Australia)

SECOND ROWERS

- 1 Josh Jackson (Australia) **52pts**
- 2 Boyd Cordner (Australia) **33pts**
- 3 Jason Taumalolo (New Zealand) **33pts**
- 4 Tohu Harris (New Zealand) **33pts**
- 5 Sam Thaiday (Australia) **32pts**

ALSO NOMINATED Gavin Cooper (Australia), Liam Farrell (England), Simon Mannering (New Zealand), Wade Graham (Australia), Zeb Taia (Cook Islands)

LOOSE FORWARDS

- 1 Corey Parker (Australia) **89pts**
- 2 Jason Taumalolo (New Zealand) **59pts**
- 3 Martin Taupau (New Zealand) **37pts**
- 4 Adam Cuthbertson (Australia) **33pts**
- 5 Sean O'Loughlin (England) **33pts**

ALSO NOMINATED Paul Gallen (Australia), Josh McGuire (Samoa), Sio Siua Taukeiaho (New Zealand), Aiden Guerra (Australia), Trent Merrin (Australia)



WORDS GARETH WALKER PHOTOGRAPHY SWPIX.COM

TEST CARD

England won a gripping series against the top-ranked Kiwis 2-1, but how did they match up against the World No 1 in all the key departments?

THE COACHES

ENGLAND 7/10

Steve McNamara was under keen scrutiny from the off, given the side's poor record against southern hemisphere opposition during his tenure.

That pressure was mounting when England started poorly in the first test and fell 10-0 behind, only for a storming comeback to earn an opening win. The dissenters reappeared after a toothless performance in London, although as for the majority of the first Test, England's defence was outstanding. And it was for much of the third as McNamara steered his side to a series win that deserves credit. He was also missing key men — not least Sam Tomkins and George Burgess — and his changes for the deciding Test paid off handsomely. Crucially, and clearly evidently, the players remain steadfastly behind him.

NEW ZEALAND 7/10

Despite the Kiwis being ranked the world's number one team, Stephen Kearney was under less pressure than his counterpart, primarily due to the list of names he had to leave behind because of unavailability.

There's no getting away from the fact that Shaun Johnson, Kieran Foran, Thomas Leuluai, Manu Vatuvei, Jared Waerea-Hargreaves, Simon Mannering and Jason Taumalolo will make a huge difference next year.

Still, Kearney's side played its full part, and his decision to hand the scrum half role to Kodi Nikorima after the first test was a minor masterstroke. Defensively the tourists were excellent — not least out wide where they completely shut England out — but with the ball they understandably struggled at times, despite the efforts of Issac Luke.

THE ATTACK

ENGLAND 5/10

England's attack can be neatly placed into two departments — backs and forwards.

Much has been written about the inability of a single back to score a try across the three Tests, something you would have got long odds on at the start of the series given the potency of Kallum Watkins, Zak Hardaker and Ryan Hall. But up front and around the ruck England regularly got over the top of their opponents, a fact illustrated by forwards scoring seven times.

At the centre of everything is the fact the half-back combination remains up in the air, with McNamara eventually plumping for his 2014 choice of Gareth Widdop and Matty Smith. George Williams will undoubtedly come again, and it was a shame Luke Gale didn't get a chance to shine.

NEW ZEALAND 5/10

The Kiwis' failings in attack can certainly be explained, given the talent sat back home watching on TV.

Any one of Shaun Johnson, Kieran Foran or Thomas Leuluai would have made a major difference to their fluidity and direction with the ball.

But at the same time, the tourists produced some of the best attacking phases of the series, albeit in patches. Jason Nightingale's try at Wigan was undoubtedly the best of the autumn, combining a smart back-line move with a stunning finish.

Kodi Nikorima is one for the future and looks likely to be a part of the set-up for years to come, but the Kiwis' inability to make their pressure tell in the third quarter of the deciding Test was crucial.

THE DEFENCE

ENGLAND 9/10

For the vast majority of the series, Steve McNamara's side were absolutely outstanding in this category.

As the coach pointed out after the third Test, this was a Kiwi team that had physically dominated the international game in recent years — their absences were mainly in the backs — and for England to handle that up front was the key factor in them winning the series.

The likes of Jesse Bromwich and Ben Matulino are among the best forwards in the world, yet they rarely ran over the top of the home defence.

Apart from the opening half hour in Hull and the closing stages in Wigan, England's defence was near impenetrable, which is a credit both to its organisation and the attitude and commitment of the players.

NEW ZEALAND 7/10

In a real arm-wrestle of a series, the Kiwis were also strong defensively for the most part, not least out wide, where they excelled.

It wasn't as if the likes of Watkins, Hall and Hardaker wasted clear-cut chances — they were simply given no space or opportunity to score by the miserly Kiwi rearguard.

Centres Dean Whare and Jordan Kahu were particularly strong throughout, quickly closing down any hint of an opportunity in front of them and putting in some robust challenges on their opposite numbers.

Up front, England edged matters, and at times punched holes in the Kiwi pack.

The fact that six of the seven England tries were scored by back rowers also suggested that they targeted a perceived weakness in that area, which they were able to exploit.



MOST IMPROVED

ENGLAND 7/10

Elliott Whitehead was reduced to a cameo role in last year's Four Nations, appearing as a substitute in the final match against New Zealand in Dunedin..

And while Brett Ferres shone in scoring five tries off the bench against France and then the Kiwis, Whitehead was comparatively quiet in the autumn's opening two games.

But come the decider, he had left his mark on the series not only with two crucial tries — one in either half — but also the overall contribution he made coming back on for a second spell after the restart. That was something coach Steve McNamara highlighted as a vital element of the Wigan win, and Whitehead's development should kick onto another level when he joins Josh Hodgson at Canberra Raiders in the NRL.

NEW ZEALAND 8/10

Before this series, Tohu Harris was probably best known in this country for being the man the Kiwis omitted from their 2013 World Cup squad to controversially call up Sonny Bill Williams.

Having been initially included, it was a decision that caused quite a stir, with Williams later publicly apologising to the Melbourne Storm man.

But with SBW currently in another rugby union phase of his eclectic career, Harris was a first choice starter, and didn't disappoint his coach Stephen Kearney, himself a top back rower. Harris was a constant menace for the Kiwis, with his highlights including romping over for the series' opening try in Hull, and displaying superb hands to create the only try of the game in London for Shaun Kenny-Dowall.

NEW BOYS

ENGLAND 8/10

Steve McNamara handed debuts to five players this autumn — John Bateman, George Williams, Joe Burgess, Mike Cooper and Jermaine McGillvary. Each could look back at their England bows with pride.

Bateman looked the back most likely to end the three-quarters scoring drought with a handful of half breaks, while Cooper was strong and solid off the bench. Williams had an impressive second half in the first Test, but then chastised his own performance a week later and was left out for the third. The same fate befell Burgess, although he did little wrong, with McNamara instead opting for the explosiveness of McGillvary. The Huddersfield winger certainly didn't let him down with an eye-catching international debut in which he caused the Kiwis plenty of problems.

NEW ZEALAND 7/10

Much was made of the Kiwis lacking experience in key positions, and as such, halfbacks Kodi Nikorima and Tuimoala Lolohea made their international bows.

Lolohea started the first Test and did okay, but was then replaced by Nikorima, who became one of the stars of the series. The talented Brisbane Broncos utility provided three try assists — in London for Shaun Kenny-Dowall, and then for Jason Nightingale's stunner at Wigan and Jordan Kahu's second half effort. Kahu was also making his first test appearances, and had an excellent series, kicking the crucial drop goal at the Olympic Stadium. Forward Sio Siua Taukeiaho debuted in the first Test off the bench but was then omitted for the last two matches as the tourists opted for experience.

THE CAPTAINS

ENGLAND 8/10

Sean O'Loughlin has seen his fair share of England heartbreak over the years, so to score the series-clinching try on his home ground must have been a major career highlight.

O'Loughlin was later handed the George Smith Medal as player of the series, having led his team from the front throughout.

He also scored the final try in Hull, memorably trampling over opposite number Adam Blair en route to the line.

It was one of the iconic images of the entire series, and summed up O'Loughlin's commitment to the cause, coming in the closing minutes of a bruising match.

When his side needed him most, the Wigan skipper had his hand up for the ball, and was among the top tacklers in each Test.

NEW ZEALAND 7/10

With usual leader Simon Mannerling among the Kiwi stars ruled out through injury, Stephen Kearney turned to joint captains in hooker Issac Luke and loose forward Adam Blair.

Luke was typically influential throughout, and was several people's choice as the man of the series despite finishing on the losing side. His tackle count was 36, 31 and 44, but it was his work with the ball that helped keep the Kiwis in the series despite the absence of their key playmakers. He remains one of the best exponents of ruck play in the world.

Blair might not have caught the eye as much for some, but his stats in defence were absolutely immense — 38, 35 and 41 tackles with just two misses across the entire series, one of which saw O'Loughlin score.



WORDS NIGEL WISKAR PHOTOGRAPHY SWPIX.com, GETTY IMAGES

OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN

London 2012's Queen Elizabeth Park played host to Rugby League for the first time as England took on the Kiwis in the second Baskerville Shield Test...



→ The lady from the Czech Republic is looking a bit perplexed — but not as much as her fellow stadium steward from Lithuania.

We're standing deep in the tunnel at the Olympic Stadium, next to the indoor 100m warm-up track, the morning before England take on New Zealand.

My new friends are staring at a large billboard emblazoned with badges from both countries.

"Excuse me, but what does relentless mean?" says Svetlana. The word is there alongside 'honest' and 'united' on the England emblem. Next to it is the black NZ badge with the famous Kiwi logo.

"What is this thing?" says Inga from Lithuania, pointing at the flightless bird.

"It looks like a rat with a beak."

"Where's its tail?"

I tell her what it is and suggest she keeps her unflattering opinions of that national symbol to



herself as not long from now the New Zealand side will be jogging through here on their way to the pitch and the traditional captain's run.

They are already a menacing bunch so probably best not to make them angrier.

Sure enough, an hour or so later the black-clad hordes come charging through like some nightmarish vision from Game of Thrones. Sensibly, Inga has disappeared.

England had their turn a couple of hours earlier with their progress to the pitch halted by 50 or so schoolkids. Luckily the youngsters had been invited.

Junior players from Sussex Merlins and Shoeburyness High School in Southend were asked by England management to meet the team and watch them train.

When the players leave the tunnel they are duly mobbed by kids asking for selfies and autographs as BBC London capture the moment.

Southend Spartans

chairman Steve Drew is hoping to have six schools in the area playing the game by January and the children are taking to their new sport with relish.

Oliver Alborn, 11, says: "I love the physical side of things with Rugby League," as he chows down on his packed lunch.

But it's worth remembering this game is not just about physicality.

As England run through their set moves, players who will not take to this field in little over 24 hours time run their own drills.

There are delicate skills on display too.

Luke Gale does keepy-ups on the run with a rugby ball. He makes it look simple.

On the field Zak Hardaker hammers a spiralling bomb high, high, high into the east London sky to the accompaniment of a high-pitched gasp from pitchside.

There's astroturf between the grass and the dugouts. It covers the track which was graced by the likes of Mo Farah, Jessica Ennis and Usain Bolt that golden summer three years ago.»

Look carefully between the gaps and you can see the running lanes. Such national sporting history is soon to be soiled when West Ham United take charge of this stadium. But that's a gripe for another day.

Steve McNamara chats to coaches from the Merlins and stoops to have his photo taken with the juniors. He's relaxed and at ease with this attention. Joe Burgess gives his beanie to one lad who sleeps in it that night.

It's fabulous PR, real hearts and minds stuff. Sonny Bill Williams grabbed headlines for handing over his union World Cup medal to a young fan. For these youngsters, this could be just as inspiring.

When the Merlins transport sets off for home in Brighton, another 11 tickets have been bought online by the time they've left the car park. The club take 85 to the game.

England are huge up close — bigger man for man than the Kiwis, I'd say.

I can't stop staring at the sheer bulk of Tom Burgess. How much does he eat? How on earth do you stop him?

Parents watching are also transfixed. The mums stare at him in a different way to myself.

When England are done they enter the inner sanctum of the changing rooms where there's a surprise guest to present the match shirts.

It's Daley Thompson, arguably our greatest ever athlete and double Olympic gold medallist.

He's 57 now but in remarkable nick and I collar him for a quick chat after he's said farewell to the team on their coach.

Thompson was mates with Ellery Hanley and I ask if the decathlete, who clocked 10.26 over 100m, ever fancied trying his hand at our game.

He jokes: "I would do it but I'm too good looking. I mean look at the blokes on the coach."

When the Kiwis have their turn, the kids have gone. The team are staying in west London and of course are stuck



in traffic getting here.

They are two hours late for their media duties and when I ask Adam Blair about facing up to Sam Burgess again next season he just grunts and appears to shake away an imaginary wasp from his curly mop.

At least he can manage a grunt. When co-skipper Issac Luke had been asked to speak on the BBC during the first Test defeat in Hull he was unable to. Their trainer couldn't find the hooker's false teeth.

Some of the Kiwis had spent their Thursday night at the Graham Norton Show.

Sam Moa, Alex Glenn, Blair, Jordan Kahu and Kodi Nikorima had all been in the audience when 50 Cent, Michael Fassbender and Julie Walters were on a show that is huge in New Zealand but airs months after we have seen it over there.

Despite that stellar line-up I'm told it was Kate Winslet's

legs and Ellie Goulding's cleavage that caught the players' attention the most.

Earlier when I walked through the muggy rain towards the stadium there was a puzzled bloke in a woollen hat trying to get past one of the barriers. He's a lovely bloke from Wigan, which may explain why he's puzzled.

We chat and he's looking for somewhere to buy a ticket.

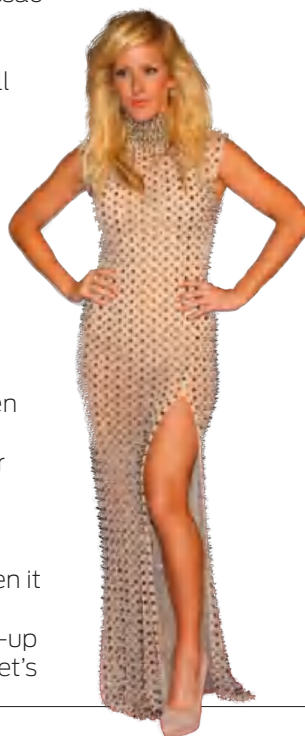
When I leave on the way back to the Tube in Stratford I see bright arc lights by the national aquatic centre.

There's a crew filming the final Bridget Joneses movie and Colin Firth is caught in the glow. I pray the bloke from Wigan stumbles into view and asks Mr Darcy if he's got a ticket.

Back at the England team hotel later that afternoon James Graham has crammed his frame into a nook in the foyer, mobile to his ear.

Chris Hill chats to team doctor Chris Brookes, but through the corridor there's an imposter in the dining room.

A dark blue table tennis table





ENGLAND'S GARETH WIDDOP
COLLECTS A HIGH BALL

sits alongside those where the players eat. I'm told Ryan Hall is a demon but James Roby could be the man to take his crown.

England head of performance Mark Bitcon writes the plan for the following day in red marker pen on a whiteboard.

It states what time the team eat, exercise, set off for the stadium and notes a change of plan. The BBC have just notified management the game will now kick off at 2.34pm, four minutes later than scheduled.

This makes a difference to warm-up, McNamara tells me.

Every minute counts in preparation at this level of combat.

Paul Wellens, a comforting presence in the backroom team, helps himself to a cuppa from the buffet as the players start to file in. They eat at six but are scheduled to snack again before sleep.

Some 24 hours later and I'm in need of something far stronger than a cup of tea after watching New Zealand strangle us 9-2. The stadium that looked so magnificent from pitch level is unforgiving without

Some of the Kiwis had spent their Thursday night at The Graham Norton Show. 50 Cent, Michael Fassbender and Julie Walters were on but I'm told it was Kate Winslet's legs and Ellie Goulding's cleavage that caught their attention the most."



something to shout about and the shallow banked stands offer a slightly detached atmosphere.

Up in the highest levels you would be a long way from the action, or lack of it today. Those West Ham fans are in for a shock. There's a Four Nations next year and already this arena is being talked about as a venue. Let's hope it serves up something better than this. It's a dreadful game and I can't remember anything duller at international level.

While England's defensive effort is huge, both teams are neutered and a contest without one single break leaves the crowd somewhat stunned. Rugby League isn't meant to be like this — our low-scoring games are often better than a try-fest, providing epic moments. This is a contest in need of some spark, a trailing arm that sparks confrontation or — heaven forbid — a shoulder charge. It needs something to ignite these brutes.

At one point in the second half a mate shouts 'C'mon Batley!' (he's not from Batley but often does this) to wake us up. The three people in front of us turn around — they're from Batley. At the Howling Hops brewery in nearby Hackney Wick an hour after the hooter the queue is six-deep. Even the blokes in Kiwi shirts next to me look miserable. Maybe they've just noticed the price of the beer. I think of the mums who were eyeing up Tom Burgess' pecs. If he'd rumbled over today they'd be telling their friends at school pick-up about the day they met England's hero.

Some 65 per cent of tickets for the match were sold in London and the south east, a heartening statistic for those of us isolated from the northern corridor. The BBC audience peaked at two million people. This was a nationwide television opportunity to capture the imagination of potential new fans. Sadly, like Issac Luke's gnashers, it's an opportunity that may have gone missing. **RLW**



WORDS STEVE MASCORD PHOTOGRAPHY SWPIX.com, NRLPHOTOS

Gospel of LUKE

ISSAC LUKE has trodden an unlikely course to the Kiwi captaincy but is making the most of the opportunity he's been given »

We're at Hotel Football, a glorious establishment owned by a cabal of Manchester United legends, just a chip kick from the front door of Old Trafford.

The top table consists of England's captain and coach, Sean O'Loughlin and Steve McNamara, and the same from New Zealand: Issac Luke and Stephen Kearney.

And the questions are anodyne, the answers routine.

Why ask a good one in front of your opposition... and the same goes for answers.

And then hooker Luke is asked about there being one referee in the coming Anglo-New Zealand Tests, as opposed to two in the NRL.

"There's a lot more things you can get away with," the New Zealand Warriors star signing says.

Now, you wouldn't call it a gasp. But there's a pregnant pause in proceedings. This is not the sort of thing one expects from the top table at these sorts of shindigs.

You don't get to be captain by saying these sorts of things by being h..h..honest.

But Issac Luke did just that. In his head, his coach was probably seeing exclamation marks.

But Kearney, like former South Sydney chief executive Shane Richardson, knows you can't change Issac Luke.

He's still the same fellow who admitted in 2011 he had tried to break the leg of his cousin, Rangi Chase, in a Test match.

Some things, Issac Luke will change himself when he discovers a reason to do so.

In his own time. Others he won't change at all.

"I sent him so many breach notices," says Richardson.

"He just became a better person. But he's still the same – honest and very, very loyal.

"It's a testament to Rugby League that it can get Issac to the point where he captains his country. You would never have

guessed he would."

Issac Luke is called "Bully" not because he was one himself but because early publicity focused on how he used to beat them up in front of their parents to teach them a lesson in the working class suburbs of Auckland.

Even back then, he had a bit of Robin Hood about him.

Let's dive into the mind of the Noble Ruffian.

Issac Luke has had his eyes on the Kiwis captaincy for some time.

"I've been hammering him [coach Stephen Kearney] for years," he smiles.

"My wife stays with him in Brisbane.

"I had a training session with him and I said

'co-captain now, or what?' Captain?' He said 'oh, I'll think about it'.

"He gave me a call before we went into camp on the Saturday.

"We have a training session for the boys who drop out of the NRL and I managed to catch up with him when I had a holiday in Brisbane with my wife and kids.

"Every year he tips me up on how my progress is going and I've been in the Sydney leadership group for a couple of years now, I guess this

is the next step, now that Simon [Mannering] was unfortunate enough not to make this tour, due to having a rest.

"Me and Adam [Blair] are the next most





“It’s a testament to Rugby League that it can get Issac Luke to the point where he captains his country. You would never have guessed he would.”

— SHANE RICHARDSON



capped players in the team.

“He broke it to me and I got to tell my old man.

“I told my wife first. She said ‘it’s something you’ve been working very, very hard towards and these are the special moments we want to live with’.

“I dreamed to be a Kiwi and I know a lot of boys who still have that dream.

“A lot of boys come through the grades and they wonder who else is going to be one.

“You don’t think you’re going to be a captain.

“It’s been pretty special ever since. Nothing really changes. You just have to lead the boys.

“There’s times now when I can have a bit of fun but at the moment we’re there to do a job and whatever it requires, maybe I have to snap out of it for a little bit.

“But that’s probably the culture that we built within the Kiwi group, to keep that going but we’re always going to have a good laugh.”

Luke finished his time with Souths on the sidelines, suspended as the world champs’ premiership defence ended against Cronulla Sharks.

A New Zealand Warriors player next season, he struggled to control his emotions in the centre of Allianz Stadium at full-time.

Having missed last year’s grand final triumph through suspension, he was reduced to watching this year’s on television.

“It was awesome. It was probably one of the best grand finals,” he said.

“To give JT [Johnathan Thurston] something he’s been working really hard towards, it was really awesome for him.

“It was hard to watch but it just made me more hungry to be able to get there next year.”

As if to twist the knife, Justin Hodges faced the disciplinary committee in Grand Final week as Luke did 12 months earlier — with the opposite result.

It’s not a subject Issac seems keen on discussing in any detail, »

LEAGUE'S TOP RAKE?

Issac Luke is considered by many – including Wakefield coach Brian Smith – to be the best hooker on the planet. But what does the Kiwi co-captain think? Matthew Shaw found out...

"Nah, I'm not. I've just played against two world class players in James Roby and Josh Hodgson for the Kiwis."

"He's [Hodgson] managed to come over to Canberra and the NRL and done exceptionally well. It would have been great to get in the World XIII, but you have other guys in the NRL like Jake Friend and Jake Granville that have been great this season and neither of them even won the positional Dally M this year as Michael Ennis got it. There are still a lot of great players in the game at the moment that I'd like to think I could take over. But if I were to get to that it would be awesome. It'll be great to see how all the hookers go next year."



"I didn't think too much of it," he tells me.

"If he got off, he got off.

"It was good."

Since all that, Luke has seen team-mates Dylan Walker and Aaron Gray become gravely ill from alleged misuse of prescription drugs.

"I caught up with Tommy [Burgess] just then," he said.

"I messaged D-Walks, Cameron McInnes, all the young fellas that I really got along with.

"I found out [about the overdose] when I got back to Sydney. It was on the news.

"Them boys have been that close to me that I sort of just didn't pay attention to it.

"I gave D-Walks a ring.

"He already knew what I was thinking so it's in the past and they've managed to get back on a straight road."

Luke, meanwhile, is on a road straight out of Sydney – but to where it all started, though probably to a nicer part of Auckland.

He and his Kiwi team-mate Roger Tuivasa-Sheck make the Warriors the knockout champion of the off-season trading period.

"Me and him, we're getting pretty close and we'll get the chance to do some stuff with Shauny [Johnson] when we get back [for pre-season].

"I control the forwards, make sure they know what they're doing. As a hooker, that's your job. You've got someone like Roger who's asking questions in the defence, in the offence – it's going to be good to play with him.

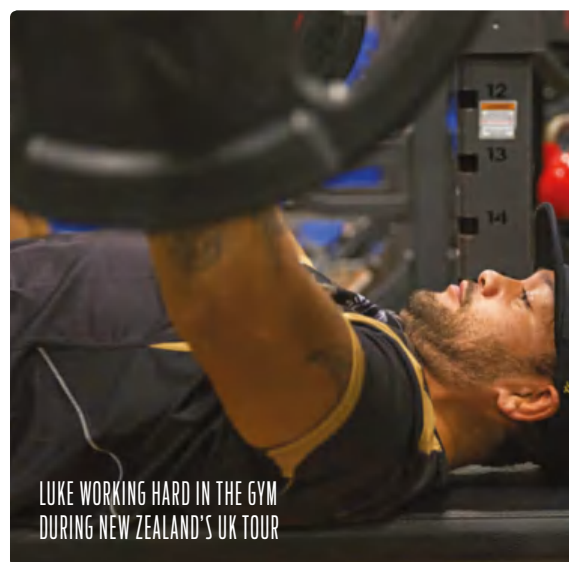
"I'll get to build that combination with him."

Luke was missing from some of the most important games Souths played over the past two years but Shane Richardson wouldn't swap him for anyone, contradictions and all.

"His story is inspirational and aspirational," says the NRL's head of strategy.

"He feels like a son to me." WORLD

“He’s still the same fellow who admitted in 2011 he had tried to break the leg of his cousin, (England’s Rangi Chase), in a Test match.”



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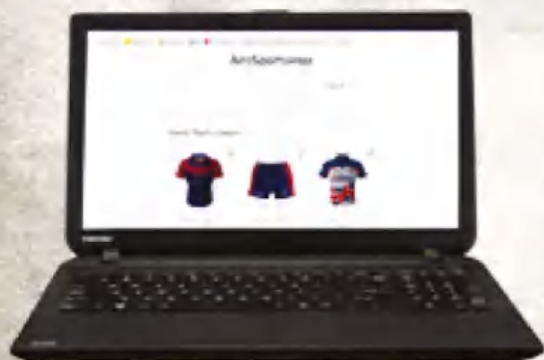
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Josh Charnley is determined to put a series of injury setbacks behind him and recapture his place on the wing for both Wigan and England



After scoring tries for fun over four injury-free seasons, Wigan's Josh Charnley could have been forgiven for thinking life as a Rugby League player was easy.

The Chorley-born winger first served notice of his try-scoring ability during short spells with Blackpool and Hull KR in 2010 before announcing himself as a future star of Super League the following year with 28 tries in 32 appearances for Wigan, including the opener as the Warriors beat Leeds in the Challenge Cup final.

He was named the club's young player of the year but that was just the start for Charnley, who scored a competition-high 31 tries to help Wigan to the League Leaders' Shield in 2012 and then crossed a record 43 times in the Warriors' double-winning season a year later.

Charnley was on top of the world at the end of 2013 after representing England in the World Cup on home soil but, by his own admission, he has struggled to recapture that form since picking up the first injury of his career in pre-season last year.

"It's frustrating," Charnley told **RLW**.

"You're wondering if you're getting enough ball or doing anything right in the game — your brain starts thinking and your performances dip.

"Being out for months last year you just think, 'what am I doing?' or 'am I happy at the club?', which I was but at the time when you're not getting picked your brain overthinks things.

"It was the first time I'd picked up an injury when I got a hernia at the beginning of the year.

"Then I did my knee and then my ankle so it was literally a full year of three injuries which wasn't nice and you wouldn't wish on anyone. It does set you back and you do a lot of rehab.

"When you're part of a team which is doing so well and winning it's hard to get back in.

It's not who you are but what you do on the pitch — Dom Manfredi took his opportunity and Budgie (Joe Burgess) was doing what he does.

"It's just hard to get into a team which is performing so well. You've just got to sit and watch. It was hard because I'd never been in that situation before. I'd come up as a young kid and fought for my spot but had not really had anyone pressuring me — I got my opportunity when Amos Roberts got injured and didn't look back."

Charnley still managed more than a try a game — 21 in 20 appearances — and played a full part in England's Four Nations campaign Down Under in 2014.

The 2015 season was more of a struggle for the 24-year-old, who fell down the pecking order at the Warriors as a result of further injury setbacks and Manfredi's form.

Charnley was forced to sit out the Grand Final and admitted he was a frustrated spectator as Wigan were edged out by Leeds in one of the great Super League finales at Old Trafford.

"I wasn't happy with how last season went because you get paid to play, not to watch the team play," he said.

"You want to be a part of the team which is winning, like Wigan were.

"It's just disappointing that I picked up a few injuries and it was hard watching the team rather than being a part of the team. It was tough watching the Grand Final. That's what you train every week for — you want to play in big games like that.

"Being sat on the sidelines watching the boys lose is hard. You want to be out there because you never know what you could bring — it might be a bit of energy or spirit which could change the game around.

"It was hard to watch them lose but the lads who were in the team deserved to be in the team.

"It was a massive setback »

but I've got a clear head now. I've been training and doing little things in the off-season so hopefully I can get a head start in pre-season and kick on in the new year."

A difficult year was capped off by his exclusion from Steve McNamara's England squad to take on New Zealand in the three-Test series, although Charnley was keen to take the positives from losing his place.

"Playing for your country is massive but in six years I've not had a proper pre-season," he said.

"I only usually get two or three weeks off but now I've had five to six weeks on my own and it's been good to have a bit of me time and relax a little bit.

"Steve left me a voicemail when I was on 'Mad Monday' and didn't have my phone on me. I listened to it and understood what he said, which was that I'd been injured through the year and needed time off.

"He's been the coach ever since I broke into the England side so knew what I needed.

"This year has gone and is in the past now. You want to work to get better and that's what I want to do.

"It was good to have people around me who were supporting me and understood what I can do.

"People would say, 'He can't do it anymore', but I've still got the talent and everything else."

On his chances of a recall for next year's Four Nations, Charnley added: "Putting the England jersey on is what you work for. When you've done your club proud, you want to put on that England jersey and do your country proud.

"But there's a lot of good English wingers knocking about and it's hard to get in at the moment."

Barring another injury setback, Charnley will be one



“Being out for months you think, ‘what am I doing?’ or ‘am I happy at the club?’, which I was but when you’re not getting picked your brain overthinks things.”





PUNCHING PASTIME

"I've always fancied doing a bit of boxing and I had a few weeks off so the time was right. I just thought I'd go down and see how I feel. I picked it up straight away and the guy who's coaching me is an ex-champion (Michael Jennings) and he was saying I should quit rugby and pursue boxing but I was like, 'No, I'm not really into going in a ring'. It's just good to keep fit and you never know when you'll need to throw a punch!"

of Shaun Wane's wingers for Wigan's opening fixture of the 2016 Super League season against Catalans Dragons on February 5.

The departure of Joe Burgess to Sydney Roosters represents a chance for Charnley to not only re-establish himself in the Warriors side but recapture the form which made him one of the most dangerous wide men in the competition.

Part of Charnley's past success was his relationship with Sam Tomkins, a close friend and someone the winger loved playing alongside.

Charnley will have to wait to be reunited with Tomkins on the field after the former New Zealand Warriors full-back

was ruled out until Easter as he recovers from knee surgery.

When Tomkins is fit, he will slot back into a young Wigan outfit hungry for silverware after two trophyless seasons.

"Now Sam is back it's a massive turning point," said Charnley.

"We'll see if we can relive what we had.

"I just want to get out there and impress. It's me and Dom now so we've just got to step up our game.

"We fell short this year as a team and the boys were gutted but we know what we need to do now and we'll all regroup in the new year and kick on from there.

"The boys want silverware." **RLW**

RECORD BREAKERS

Adrian Morley relives his heroic Kilimanjaro climb for the Steve Prescott Foundation



For more information, log on to steveprescottfoundation.co.uk

Last month, 35 members of the Rugby League community climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in aid of the Steve Prescott Foundation, raising over £220,000 in the process, writes Matthew Shaw.

Former Salford, Warrington, Leeds and Sydney star Adrian Morley was one of the brave climbers.

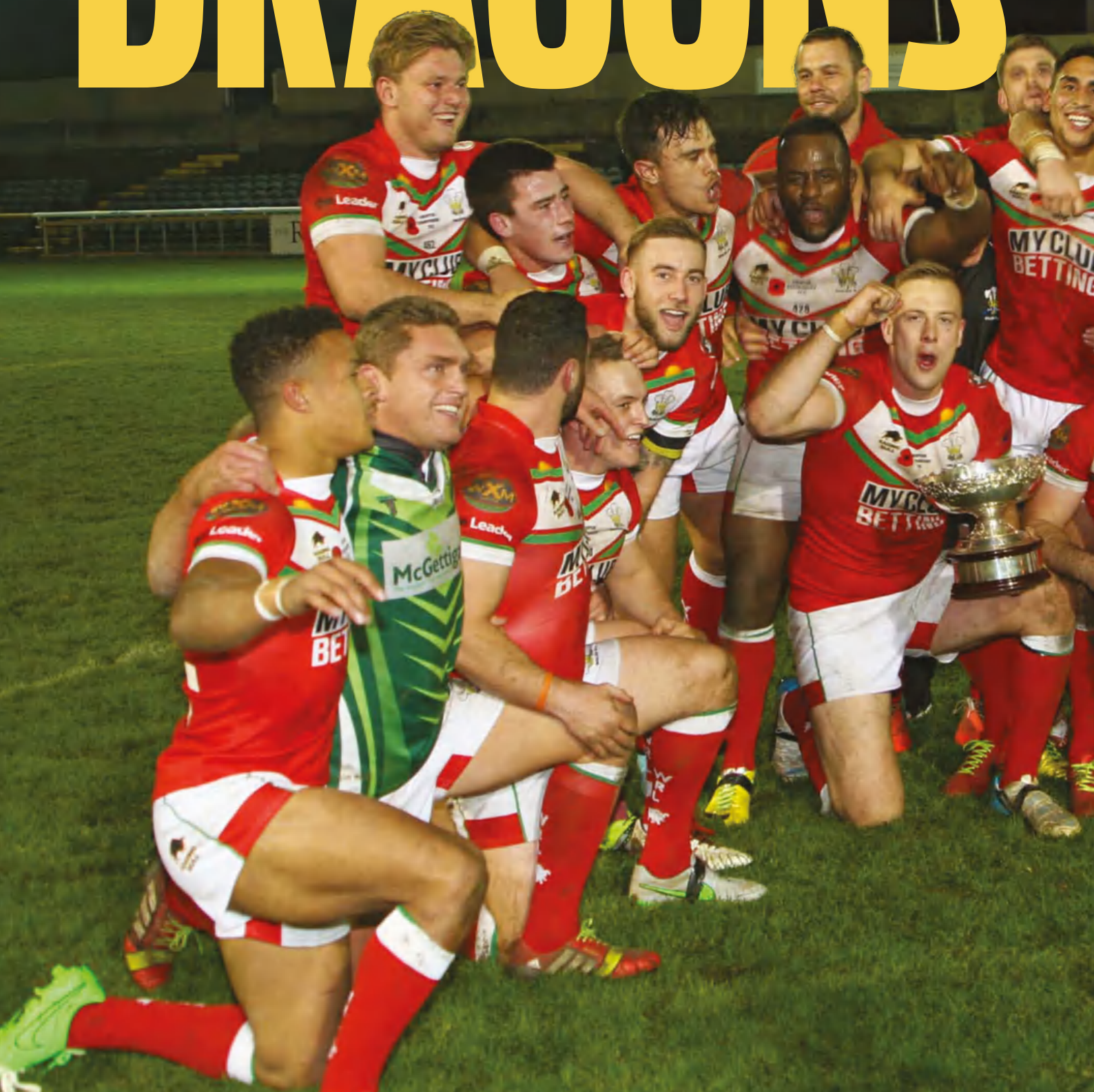
"You don't get many opportunities like that in life. When you do a challenge like that you really do get a sense of achievement and reward," he said.

"We've completed something as a group that will mean we have a bond forever. As I was descending I fell ill. All my co-ordination was gone, I had a bad headache and I was in a bad state really. I had to be aided down by a few of the guys. I was disappointed not to come down on my own accord, but making it to the top of Kilimanjaro was the real goal. Steve Prescott's mantra was that if it isn't challenging then it isn't a challenge. What Steve put his body through was inspiring. As demanding as it was it was really enjoyable and I can't wait for the next one."



WORDS GARETH WALKER PHOTOGRAPHY RLPHOTOS

DRAGONS



FIRE



Wales turned recent history on its head to emerge undefeated and triumphant as European Champions, while Scotland slumped from top to bottom and France underperformed yet again

John Kear is a coach whose career has been littered with underdog triumphs, and his guidance of Wales from wooden spoonists to European champions should be listed alongside the best of them.

It might not capture the attention of Sheffield's famous 1998 Wembley win over Wigan, or Wakefield's dramatic relegation escape of 2006.

But in taking a group of players who had lost their last 12 matches and steering them to three successive wins over more fancied opponents, Kear has revitalised the Welsh ahead of next year's crucial World Cup qualifying campaign.

Not that the vastly experienced tactician will seek the credit for the remarkable turnaround, instead preferring to deflect attention onto his gutsy squad.

"The players got what they deserved," he insisted when speaking to **RLW** two days after the Championship-sealing win over Ireland in Bray.

"The effort they put in off the field was demonstrated by our goal line defence on the field. The way the players approached everything, from training to team meetings, was with full commitment, enthusiasm and no little aggression.

"We hadn't even won a game for a number of years — we'd lost 12 on the bounce. Losing does become a habit, and as we've since demonstrated, so does winning. You feel much better doing the latter.

"There were players in our squad with quite a few international caps who had never played in a winning team. I think the difference in the group was that they were a true team rather than a group of individuals. In coaching it's always been my philosophy that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and the players really bought into that."

This was also a true Welsh team.

Of the 17 that beat Ireland 30-4, 12 were Wales born, ensuring the post-match victory singing of "Delilah" was done with extra relish. Kear was also able to name the same starting 13 for»

each of the three matches, another significant factor.

Last year the Dragons finished rock bottom of the same competition, shipping 130 points in three matches in Kear's first campaign in charge. Much of that was put down to the fact they were shorn of most of their experienced players, and their expected return in 2015 should have led to a natural improvement.

But the likes of Lloyd White and Ben Flower — Kear's captain and vice captain — had to withdraw close to the tournament, again leaving Wales with a relatively young side.

"We didn't get everyone back that we thought we might, but what we did get was some experience and some physicality up front in Craig Kopczak, Phil Joseph and Ant Walker, and that made a difference," Kear said.

"But what I think really happened was that as a team we really gelled. The players bought into what we were trying to achieve, and once we got that first victory over Scotland, I told my son we'd win the competition. He said, 'You've only won one game', but you could just sense the confidence and belief flooding back into the players. That was reinforced against France and we finished with a pretty comprehensive win over Ireland.

"Still to come back we've got Ben Flower, Lloyd White, the Evans brothers Rhys and Ben, Tyson Frizzell and Larnie Patrick — and that's half a dozen just off the top of my head. There's a lot of quality there, but the players that did play really deserve the pat on the back.

"Half of that team played in last year's tournament and that shows the turnaround in the group. It shows their development as players and that they've bought into what we're trying to do with Wales.

"I'd also like to pay tribute to the people off the field. You don't take part in a tournament like this for financial reward — whether you're Wales, Scotland or Ireland. People are there because they want to be. We wanted to build a professional environment, and for me that doesn't come from being paid, it



comes from attitude and your state of mind. We attempted to create that off the field and the chairman and chief executive really endeavoured to do that and the players appreciated it. We got the response we wanted to creating a professional environment."

Kear rightly sticks to his team mentality when asked about key performers, but there were some who certainly deserve mention, with experienced back line members Elliot Kear, Rhys Williams and Michael Channing all playing their part.

But it was two more unlikely figures who were at the centre of the Wales wins in Gloucestershire All Golds pair Steve Parry and Courtney Davies, the latter of which helped run the side from halfback with fellow youngster Ollie Olds.

From League 1 to the international stage is a considerable step up, but both Parry and Davies significantly enhanced their growing reputations. As for Kear, you get the impression that he loved every minute of it.

"It's been tremendous," he added.

"What I really enjoyed was spending daylight hours with

the players, because you really can go into things in far greater detail than in a part-time environment.

"I love that and the part-time players loved it as well, and hopefully it's accelerated their development. We still only had six full-time players in that team, and three of our starting 13 came from Gloucestershire All Golds.

"It was a fair old achievement for them."

Elsewhere, Scotland mirrored Wales' turnaround in reverse, going from champions to bottom of the pile after three straight defeats. At face value, that looks worrying ahead of their participation in next year's Four Nations, but the reality is that they will be strengthened by several NRL players next season and coach

Steve McCormack could still find positives in this year's campaign.

"I'm so proud of how the young lads coped with the challenge," McCormack said.

"We had another three debuts and more than half the squad were young kids who have come through the Scotland Rugby League pathway.

"That stands us in good stead for the next 10 years. I think we'll look back on this and say that was tough but it was





actually a great thing for Scottish Rugby League because we've given those boys a chance and they've taken it."

France fell short, again, and there were more publicly-aided issues with Catalans Dragons, in what is becoming a tiresome but undoubtedly crucial saga. Their autumn campaign was dominated by a thumping 84-4 defeat to England in the middle of the European Championship, something coach Richard Agar felt had a significant impact as they lost the following week in Wales. But he could also find reasons to be positive.

He said: "Overall in this tournament we have blooded nine new caps and played a relatively inexperienced side. The England game knocked us sideways a little bit and it was a game with hindsight that we might have been better without and that certainly had an impact on our squad.

"For us the big challenge is trying to find some emerging talent in France and it's very hard at times to see beyond the immediate result — but I think we've certainly found some talent."

Ireland fell short of last year's two wins, and looked a tired side in the final 30-4 defeat at home to the champions.

Coach Mark Aston admitted: "It's been a long season. The three weeks have been tough and we've done OK. We were more disappointing than last year but we have seen progression as another young kid, Gareth Gill (from Irish side Ballynahinch Rabbitohs) made his debut."

The Irish and Welsh now have a World Cup qualifying campaign to look forward to this time next year — and you get the sense Kear is already relishing the prospect of that particular test given their disappointing showing in the 2013 event. He added: "This year we've righted a few wrongs from the previous European campaign, and from the last World Cup campaign when Wales felt the force of the Italian team. No doubt they will bring a lot of NRL players in again, but we'll go with our Welsh team of homegrown men, and I think they will fancy the challenge." 

“Losing does become a habit, and as we’ve since demonstrated, so does winning. You certainly feel much better doing the latter.”



World in Motion

Five months into the job, Rugby League International Federation chief executive David Collier admits it is time for the talking to stop and for the action to begin

WORDS IAN LAYBOURN PHOTOGRAPHY THINKSTOCK, SWPIX.com



D

avid Collier, the former international cricket supremo now heading up the RLIF set out his aims and aspirations at a recent two-day congress in Paris where he left the 30 delegates in no doubt as to his lofty ambitions.

In a nutshell, by the end of his strategic eight-year plan in 2025, Collier wants Rugby League to be played in 70 countries with 20 million supporters world-wide, a 16-nation World Cup in which half the teams have a realistic chance of reaching the final, a doubling of the global television audience and a presence in at least two more G20 countries.

He also wants to see 40 countries recognised by their National Olympic Committees, a structure in which the top eight nations are financially sustainable, an eight-team women's World Cup and an annual \$10million turnover, with \$8m of it invested in targeted nations to increase competitiveness of the top eight, rather than one-size-fits-all grants.

In addition, Collier would like to create long-term broadcasting agreements, with an optimum mix of pay-per-view and free-to-air, and one set of unified laws and regulations.

Not much to ask for then!

The International Federation, which currently boast 18 full members and 53 associate ones, has been little more than a talking shop since its formation in 1948 but the appointment in the summer of a first full-time organiser was designed to give it some teeth and Collier is confident he can get some results from banging heads together, after his initial softly-softly approach.

"For the

first four to five months I was literally going round talking to people, understanding what people want and trying to build consensus, which I think has proved to be very valuable," he says.

"I think if we had gone in and said 'we'd like to do this, this and this' without all that discussion, we wouldn't have got the consensus that we've now got. What was particularly pleasing in Paris was the unanimity around the table with people saying 'this is the right way forward, it's what we've been waiting for, let's get on and do it'."

There has been a widespread belief that for years Australia have been dragging their heels on international Rugby League and their refusal to play ball with the RFL this autumn did little to rid them of that perceived insular attitude.

However, Collier says the Australians have perhaps been misunderstood and he is prepared to compromise over their demands for greater protection for their players.

So, while they appear to have bought into his plans for more international Rugby League, it is unlikely Australia will play as much as other nations because of the importance they place in State of Origin.

"I think that's quite reasonable because those players have to be released from clubs," Collier says. "It is important we understand that.

"The NRL have been fantastic. The reason we have spent so much time listening and learning and building consensus was to learn what the real concerns were. And there are some genuine issues that perhaps we've not understood as well as we could have done. State of Origin has become so »



important, it's almost the equivalent of an international.

"We're working with Australia as to what we can fit into the calendar and we've not been overly burdensome. We've said two events in a four-year period is very reasonable.

"What you have to agree — and that's where the calendar of events is so important — is where the priority periods are.

"We have two of the greatest leagues in the world in Super League and the NRL and it's important to respect where they are in the calendar and to make sure we've not got over-lapping internationals. That avoids any tensions about whether players should be released or not.

"We've got plenty of time in the remainder of the year to fill in the periods of activity that we need."

So the bottom line is that the Kangaroos will be committed to two World Cups and two other global events — which could be a World Nines Championship — in the period 2018-25.

Collier adds: "Two of those multi-national events will be World Cups in 2021 and 2025 so we're looking at events in 2019 and 2023.

"There is still a question mark about what that second event is. What we are going to do is go out and test the market place commercially.

"How mature is nines for example, is a World Nines Championship a meaningful proposition or should we have an Inter-Continental Cup where we can have say nations four to 16 playing off against each other to qualify for a five or six-team event alongside England, Australia and New Zealand?

"We've got to work with broadcasters and sponsors to make sure that second event produces finances to be able to help develop the game in nations around the world.

"There was a lot of talk in Paris that with four events it opens up a lot of opportunities.

A World Cup is a bit more difficult for a lot of nations

to stage because you probably need a minimum of 10 to 12 high-quality stadiums and there's not too many nations that can deliver on that.

"Whereas, if it's a shorter version event, there are probably 20 or 30 countries that would have a realistic chance. And it's a great stepping stone to being able to bid for a World Cup.

"So I'm expecting to see even more interest in staging the second events than there is in staging the World Cup."

So that leaves blanks at the end of the 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2024 domestic seasons and Australia could still help fill them if the RFL and New Zealand can persuade them to pick up their bat.

Collier terms these bi-lateral events such as the recent Test series between England and New Zealand and the Four Nations over which the RLIF has no jurisdiction.

"The RLIF doesn't own and doesn't wish to own those rights," says Collier, who says his organisation will receive only a small profit from the series.

"The RLIF gets a share of some of the ticket revenues but the property is owned by those



“We want to make sure the strong remain strong but then we want to support the likes of the USA, Canada and France.”





countries — and that's similar in most sports.

"There is still an international window in the calendar and that's where the bi-laterals come in, like the New Zealand series or if we want to play the Lions series.

"Europe may well want to enhance the continental championship and that gives nations four to eight a real opportunity to play against each other on a regular basis.

"There are priority dates of when they can be which is really helpful but there is a bit of work for the countries to do now to populate their part of the calendar. I know there are already discussions going on, particularly with New Zealand, England and Australia as to what form that will take.

"The reason we're now excited is that we can go ahead. We can go out to tender for the next eight years and we can go ahead with the appointment of the 2021 World Cup hosts which will be early next year. We're up and running."

So Lions tours could be back

Can the RLIF deliver on their promises? Let us know what you think on Twitter



on if the Australians play ball but it remains a possibility that the 2016 Four Nations Series could be the last in its current form. The biggest problem for Rugby League internationally is that it is basically a three-horse race but Collier is hoping revenue generated by the second global event can be used to strengthen the nations just below the top tier.

"I think the fact that we've had two such great domestic finals in England this year shows why the club game is important but, if we want to be a major player on the world stage, the international game is where the sport gains its credibility," he says.

"That it is why we want to strengthen the top eight so that the World Cup is even more competitive.

"In England two years ago we saw the USA getting through to the quarter-finals but I said in Paris I want to have eight nations competing in 2025 with a realistic chance of reaching the final. We want to strengthen the next grouping.

"We haven't got unlimited resources and that's going to be the case even in this next cycle so we want to target six nations to help them develop."

Bizarrely, one of the nations set for financial assistance will be New Zealand, who despite their new ranking of number one in the world, are struggling financially. Unlike England and Australia, the Kiwis do not have a professional domestic competition from which to generate revenue and, because of the restrictive nature of the television deal, they will go two years without playing an international on home soil.

"We want to help them stabilise their finances, because with not having a significant domestic league themselves, they need some help and support," Collier explains.

"We want to make sure the strong remain strong but then we want to support the likes of the USA, Canada and France, while there is a real appetite to grow Rugby League in Russia so we'll have a good look at that."

The big breakthrough internationally could come if the game would be spread beyond its current heartlands and Collier makes no secret of his desire to target two more G20 countries.

"That's where we want to grow Rugby League audiences going forward," he says.

"At the moment we've got England, Australia and France but, if we want to broaden media audiences around the world, we've got to be significant in more G20 countries. Whether that is Argentina, Canada, Mexico, China, there's loads of opportunities.

"At the moment, USA and Canada are probably further down the line so we want them to become more and more established but it is a question of working through a plan with each of those national bodies that is meaningful to that nation." **RLW**

For the latest developments on this and any other story, log on to TotalRL.com — the best website in Rugby League

Run for the

WORDS IAN LADYMAN & MATTHEW SHAW

Slammin' Sam Burgess is back in Rugby League after a short, turbulent and unhappy stint in union, which provoked an extraordinarily vicious backlash

SAM BURGESS IS A
CANTERBURY AMBASSADOR

Hills

As Sam Burgess settles back in to a familiar routine in Sydney, it would be easy to close your eyes and pretend the last 12 months never really happened.

It is, however, not that simple.

Certainly, it hasn't taken the 26-year-old enforcer long to readjust to life back on the other side of the world.

"Early morning breakfast by the ocean, followed by a stroll down by the beach," he tweeted soon after his return.

"It's wonderful to be back in Sydney. Have a great day."

So Rugby League has one of its marquee players back and the over-hyped, under-performing English rugby union set-up has received yet another poke in the eye following its disastrous recent efforts in its own World Cup.

The ripples of the Burgess affair will be felt for quite some time, though. Relations between the two codes are back on the floor with the verbal sparring that has dominated the sports pages since Burgess confirmed his decision to end his ill-fated switch to union reflecting well on absolutely nobody.

Burgess himself — writing in his Daily Mail column — outlined a number of reasons for his return to his favourite code, homesickness and his love of league being two of the more prominent. He was also happy to have a dig at the environment he leaves behind, claiming union is a world where you can't necessarily trust the bloke getting changed next to you.

Ultimately, though, the League community is simply glad to have him back, even if Burgess resisted an offer from Super League champions Leeds Rhinos to head back to South Sydney Rabbitohs.

"I think it is absolutely massive for Rugby League in general," Wigan's Joel Tomkins told **RLW**.

"It's a massive coup that someone of his calibre and stature within the sporting world has decided to come

back after 12 months.

"It just shows just how great a product Rugby League is."

Tomkins speaks from experience, of course. The Wigan forward played 40 times for Saracens and three times for England during a brief spell on the dark side. To a much lesser degree, Tomkins faced the same pressures that Burgess did, as attempts were made by the RFU to fast track him in to the national set up.

Undoubtedly, the media spotlight shines brighter if you are a League convert. The context in which you are viewed and judged is markedly different. Tomkins certainly went through that after his switch and he admitted that he watched the Burgess scenario develop with some discomfort.

"I think the way he was handled by the media was to be expected," added Tomkins.

"He was going to be in the spotlight because it was a high-profile move and it being a home World Cup.

"But Sam definitely came in for a lot of unwarranted criticism. To get into the position he did is unbelievable.

"To be playing the game for eight months and getting in the World Cup squad is an achievement in itself."

Burgess' time playing union certainly has not diminished his appeal to the best club sides in League. Not only did Leeds have a sniff at a player born 10 miles down the road in Dewsbury, Kiwi hooker Issac Luke told us that he had tried to get him to come to New Zealand Warriors only for finances to rule the ambitious move out.

"He's home and it's going to be great for the game," said Luke.

"It's going to be great for him as well.

"I tried to get him to the Warriors to be fair, but I don't think we could get him under the salary cap."

The reasons that League players get driven in to the arms of union are personal to each »

Timeline

FEBRUARY 2014 Announces switch to rugby union

OCTOBER 2014 Wins Clive Churchill medal in NRL Grand Final

NOVEMBER 2014 Makes debut for Bath RU

JANUARY 2015 Scores first RU try, picked for England Saxons

APRIL 2015 Impresses after switch to blindside flanker

AUGUST 2015 Named in England Elite Squad for World Cup

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2015 Plays (well) in England's disastrous World Cup campaign, but is blamed for the failure by several former players and rugby union journalists

OCTOBER 2015 Given leave from Bath to decide on future

NOVEMBER 2015 Re-signs with South Sydney Rabbitohs

player. Certainly, money is a factor while the carrot of playing international rugby in front of huge crowds is another.

Super League remains a great product but England games can, unfortunately, feel a little flat.

Burgess was undoubtedly attracted by the glamour.

A full Twickenham is, whether we like it or not, an exciting, stimulating place to play.

Ultimately, though, it soon became clear that it was the game itself he could not warm to, something that wasn't helped by confusion over where he should play.

"Everyone is saying I've taken the easy option but it would have been easier to stay and play on in union," wrote Burgess in the Daily Mail.

"I could have just kept playing at six for Bath, but I believe it would have taken about 18 months for me to break into the England team in that position — and my contract is up in about 18 months.

"In sport we have a very limited window in which to compete at the top level and I didn't want to see those 18 months go by without the same excitement and enthusiasm as the previous 12.

"I came to union to try to play at 12, but I ended up playing at six for Bath.

"I managed to get into the England training squad as a 12, even though I was playing as a flanker for my club.

"The competition in the back row was really tough and I had no chance of making the team there, but at 12 I had a better shot because there aren't as many technicalities in the way so you can learn it quicker.

"To get in that 31-man squad, I had to work so hard. To crack it was really, really tough but I loved that. I made it into the team as a 12 and I really felt that I fully deserved to be there.

"But I think a lot of people outside the England camp had an agenda against both England and, in some



circumstances, me.

"Certain ex-players had an agenda and sections of the media had an agenda, too.

"I also think certain coaches not involved with England had an agenda. Slowly but surely, when you are trying to get support within the team and the voices from outside with an agenda are so strong, it's too powerful.

"No matter what I did, I always felt that I was fighting a losing battle. Then, since the tournament, there have been players coming out in the press, leaking stories. I find that really disappointing and I didn't want to stay in a sport like that.

"It makes it harder to build on

“ Since the World Cup, players have leaked stories to the press. I didn't want to stay in a sport like that.”





his side of the divide has much to learn from the other.

Woodward has previously criticised the RFU for failing to lure Sam Tomkins to union, for example, and believes those lining up to criticise Burgess this month should have a look at themselves first.

"We are the laughing stock of not only world rugby but also sport and business," said Woodward.

"The rest of the world says those involved in English rugby are arrogant.

"I hate this reputation but that is exactly what the RFU have been."

Burgess now has a hot Australian summer ahead as he tries to readjust his mind and his body to Rugby League.

That is not as easy as it sounds, as Joel Tomkins found on his return to Wigan in June 2014.

In the NRL he has a lot to look forward to. Michael Maguire's Rabbitohs, despite their elimination at the first stage of the play-offs last season, will be stronger for his return.

With England, meanwhile, there is a World Cup in 2017 and, given the gentle improvement of Steve McNamara's team in recent times, Burgess will perhaps eye that with more relish than the one he has just stumbled through.

The debate over whether Burgess should have turned tail so quickly will go on for a while, and it is easy to see both sides.

Burgess did, after all, make a commitment that he has chosen not to see through.

The reasons for his going remain open to conjecture, too, but perhaps the answer is startlingly simple.

Maybe he just didn't like the sport he joined in October 2014 as much as the one he had played all his life. If he felt this, then he will not be the first.

"I was always a league player in union," Burgess admitted rather frankly.

"I don't think that ever changes." **RLW**

when people from the inside are crumbling."

Strong words indeed but no doubt prompted by criticism of his decision to go home.

Scrutiny of Burgess' time in union was always going to be intense. Some of the criticism of his decision to leave has nevertheless been stinging.

Former England forward Paul Ackford wrote a leader on the back page of *The Times*, the tenure of which was simply: Goodbye and Good Riddance. Former fly-half Stuart Barnes, meanwhile, used his own

platforms as a Sky TV pundit and Sunday Times journalist to castigate the departing Burgess.

"The bloke had been selected without any justification whatsoever for England and repaid the blind and infatuated faith of the management team by walking away," said Barnes.

It must be said that Barnes has never been particularly enamoured with what League has to offer and he is not alone. Former England coach Clive Woodward, however, is often less blinkered and has in the past suggested





MIKE

The demise of League 13 highlights a serious issue in our game —

The League 13 player union was set up back in 2011 as the only one of its kind in Britain.

The idea had been talked about for a long time but it took some serious effort and enthusiasm from the chairman Jon Wilkin — and everyone else initially involved — to set the organisation up.

Essentially, the union was created to give players a voice and contribute more to the game they put their bodies on the line for, as well as offer support when members require it. Last month, though, League 13 closed its doors and won't be representing its members anymore.

It's a sad, disappointing day for Rugby League in my view because it was set up with great intentions — to make life easier and fairer for the players while also improving the game in general.

If you can think back to 2011, you might remember the union's launch. The players backing it were pretty serious and it had a high profile committee with members including Jamie Peacock, Jon Wilkin, Lee Briers and Clint Newton.

Some figures during the following years suggested up to 80 per cent of Super League players were members, so with that committee and such a strong membership, support for the union wasn't an issue.

So what has made it close down so early?

I believe there are numerous reasons why the organisation hasn't succeeded.

I spoke to Jon Wilkin about it and he listed time, resources, interest in its function and politics within the game as some



THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF LEAGUE13

I'm still hopeful a players union can be resurrected at some point but I doubt anybody will try in the near future because of the barriers in the way."

of the factors behind its demise. That list probably won't mean a lot to most people so I'll try break it down and look into the issue in more detail.

An issue with unions in general is that people are only interested in them when they need help, or if they can offer some perks. As a result they can be short sighted when it comes to an overall aspect of what a union could achieve in the future if it was supported and grown.

I'm afraid to say as a playing group we were guilty of this.

I mentioned membership was quite high at certain periods and we had high-profile names backing it, but not enough players really cared about its function or maybe didn't think a players group could affect change, which moves me on to the next issue.

The chief executive of League 13 recently spoke of the difficulties he faced in dealing with the RFL and some of the clubs.

Initially, getting the RFL and clubs to recognise the union took 15 months, then it didn't get any better. Only the RFL could explain the reasons why they are not in favour of supporting and assisting the players and their representatives to create a successful players union.

Maybe a union is seen as a threat, an organisation that will challenge decisions, have the ability to publicly voice issues in the game that need addressing, but which the governing body would prefer to keep behind closed doors.

SHENTON

the opinions of players aren't respected by the people running it



DO THE RFL CARE WHAT PLAYERS THINK?

You might wonder why the governing body would feel threatened by a union, especially if there are players involved that are passionate about improving the game. From the RFL and Super League clubs' point of view, I imagine their reservations may also include finance — how much it would cost them, and the fact players could use the union to get more money. They may also feel it's not required.

The more I think about it and put myself in the shoes of the administrators, maybe threatened isn't the word. It could be a matter of respect.

It's quite a scary thought but it appears to me that, as a body of players, our thoughts on issues surrounding the game aren't respected by the people running it.

I was a member of League 13 right up until it closed last month and saw how passionately the people involved in the organisation thought about

Rugby League and genuinely cared for the players' wellbeing.

But they were constantly fighting a losing battle.

Other sports have shown the way with regards to player unions and you only have to look at the single remaining Rugby League players union in the game — Australia's RLPA — to see what they are capable of. The RLPA is at a point now where they have serious power within the game in Australia.

Most, if not all, players over there are members and the resulting organisation is not only improving the game, but focusing on the welfare of the players and the sport for future generations. A lot of this is down to support from the players but also how the union is run and, more importantly, funded. League 13 was funded by the members

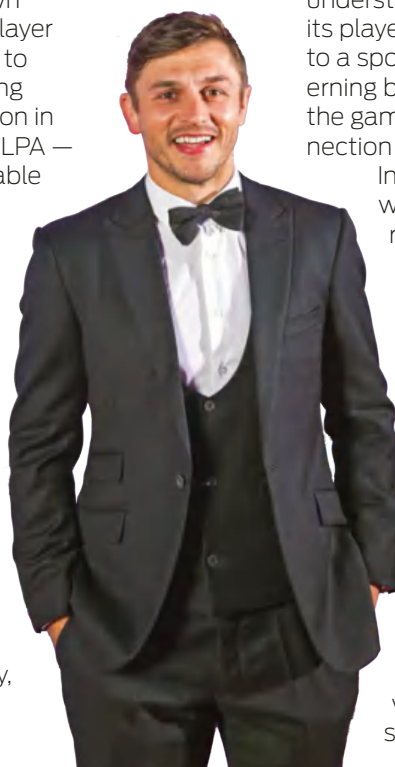
paying £10 per month, the RLPA is funded by the NRL, allowing it to take a percentage of the TV rights package each year.

This shows how well-supported and respected the RLPA is in Australia and the game is growing over there with the input from them.

As for the future of a players union in Britain, I'm still hopeful it can be resurrected, but I doubt anybody will try in the near future because of the barriers in the way. We need to flip the mentality of nearly everyone involved in the game at the administrative level within clubs and the RFL to be able to finally make change.

It's a great positive to see the likes of Jamie Peacock going into the business/management side of the sport. I'm not suggesting that is the only answer but surely intelligent experienced ex-players who understand Rugby League and its players would be invaluable to a sports organisation or governing body, given their feel for the game and the close connection with players.

In an ideal world there would be a transparent relationship between all parties (players' union, RFL, clubs) where the union was professionally run with resources provided by the governing body. Real issues, ideas and suggested solutions could be put forward to the RFL and clubs. Through something like this I'm positive we could improve the game and even cut out some of the mistakes we as a professional sport make too often. 



With all due respect to the many towns and cities where Rugby League has established a bridge-head over the past couple of decades, Coventry might always have been the place outside the heartlands most likely to embrace the game.

It's a unique combination; a working-class city where the football culture is relatively fragile — Coventry City must be right up there with Leeds United in the league table of mismanaged British sporting clubs — and where the rugby culture is relatively strong.

Coventry even has a smattering of Rugby League history. England played Wales at what is now the Bears' ground at The Butts — where the citizenry used to practice their archery — in 1910 and the Northern Union club in the city lasted until 1912, after being set up to take advantage of Coventry being expelled by the RFU for professionalism.

Then there's the Keith Fairbrother Factor. The Coventry and England forward never threatened to be a success when he switched codes to play for Leigh. He maintained an interest in league, however, which he carried with him as an influential figure in union.

It also feels a bit like a window on The South.

A couple of years ago, I ran into a family from Coventry on their way to the World Cup semi-final at Wembley.

'Well, it's our local match,' one of them told me. Look on the Bears' website before the second Baskerville Shield game this month and it offers coach travel to London for the second Test against the Kiwis at London's Olympic Park. In Rugby League terms, it is very much in their backyard.

Since their really dark days, Coventry City have returned from their unpopular exile at Northampton, but their old ground, the Ricoh Arena, is now owned by Wasps, a club with its

THE BEAR ESSENTIALS

They joined League 1 with little fanfare, but Coventry are flying the flag for organic expansion in the Midlands

“They average almost 500 through the gates, well above their projections, and visiting supporters have been impressed with their facilities and general approach.”



roots a hundred miles away.

On top of that, Coventry RU, once such a power in the land, have their separate existence.

It's a confusing picture, but one within which the Bears' managing director, Alan Robinson, is convinced that there is room for a Rugby League club.

An Ulsterman whose route into the game was Student Rugby League, he has treated this as a long-term project.

His belief is that it is the gradual, grass-roots approach that will plant clubs that will survive and prosper.

An instantly recognisable powerful, ball-handling prop in his playing days, he has always said that there were hard yards to be made before the club gets anywhere. He has been making those yards since 1998, as a man completely committed to the long haul.

'I'm a big believer in that,' he says. 'The more work you put into the community, the more you get back.'

Apart from what they do on their own account, the Bears have a relationship with Wasps that Robinson believes works in their favour.

He is not too proud to sell Rugby League as a summer alternative to the uninitiated, if it means they get to try Rugby League.

After years of playing against other development area teams, the Bears took the great leap forward this year of becoming a semi-professional club in League 1.

On the face of it, they have found it a difficult transition.

'It was always a massive challenge for us,' Robinson says.

'We always knew it was going to be tough.'

Tough it has certainly been,



but they have managed five wins from their 22 fixtures and have been competitive in a number of games against more established clubs.

They finished two off the bottom of the division, with only Hemel Stags and the South Wales Scorpions below them. Wins over South Wales, London Skolars, Hemel and Oxford kept up morale, but it looks from the outside a little like a competition within a competition.

'What the results don't show is a number of games against the likes of Rochdale and Barrow, where we were competitive for most of the game before falling away,' Robinson says.

They have succeeded, however, despite their



modest playing record, in averaging almost 500 at the gates, which is well above their projections, and visiting supporters have been impressed with their facilities and general approach.

They have also set their sights on playing the role of a focus for the code in the Midlands; they already have supporters travelling regularly from all corners of the Heart of England.

Their facilities are set to improve in one important respect next season, although visitors in town for matches might not notice.

The Bears are negotiating use of the Prison Service's state-of-the-art sports complex between Coventry and Rugby and that will give them a significant advantage over other teams in the division.

One thing the Bears will

not do is to try to match the bigger clubs in the competition in the transfer market. Their ambitions and their strategy revolve around growing their own, although they have signed two yet-to-be-named but experienced Australians for next season, to provide a little extra direction and know-how.

Apart from that, it is more a case of 'what we have, we hold.' The coach, Tom Tsang, who played alongside Robinson for what was then Leeds Met University, is back, but with the benefit of this year's hard-won experience.

He has recently re-signed many of the players who proved last season that they are capable of playing at this level.

That includes their highly rated loose forward, Matt Cooper, plus hooker Richie Hughes and the prop or second-row, Alex Beddows.

Robinson describes him as 'a Louis McCarthy-Scarsbrook type of player' — and you can't have too many of them.

The signings that show most clearly what the Bears are all about, though, are three local young men who all started their Rugby League in the Bears' junior sides, before going on to play for the Midlands Academy side.

Prop Trae O'Sullivan, wing or full-back Hayden Freeman and half-back Elliott Norman are all expected to be pushing for places in the senior side in 2016.

Typically, Robinson is reluctant to set any headline-grabbing goals for that season.

'But we've aimed to get a bit stronger every year and we'll be trying to maintain that,' he says.

'And if we can make the play-offs that would be a massive achievement for us.'

The attempt to do that begins at an appropriate place for a pioneering club.

They are the first opponents to travel to Toulouse, who are returning to a level they have already played at.

It will tell the Coventry Bears more about the nature of the challenge they will face in 2016. [RUGBY](#)



ALEX

Injuring yourself in Rugby League is simply an



Last month's Rugby League World magazine carried in it an article I found very interesting.

It was about players being put under pressure to play through injuries, and featured the thoughts of Shaun Briscoe, who shared some of his stories about being forced to play through the pain barrier.

This off-season I have had surgeries on my shoulder and ankle.

The shoulder has been an ongoing problem that I've played through, while I did my ankle in the last tackle of the season against Leeds.

Picking up injuries is part and parcel of playing sport, not just Rugby League, especially at the back end of the year when there will be niggles that every player has got. It's something that your body gets used to.

My shoulder for example didn't get in the state it was

in due to one incident, but because of the general wear and tear of impacts you have in tackles. That's the same in any sport; if you ask footballers you'll find they get their knees cleared out because they've just been running for 90 minutes at a time for 20 years.

As human beings we're probably not biologically designed to do what we do in our sport, so you are picking them up as you go along.

But these surgeries get you going again and back to normal. In my opinion, it is a player's choice whether they play through an injury or not.

If you ask every player in Super League, you'll find 99 per cent will say they've played with an injury, but in my experience I have never felt under pressure to, especially when it could cause further harm.

If I've ever gone into a game with a risk of further damage I'm made aware of it. We have

Picking up injuries is part and parcel of playing sport – not just Rugby League. At the back end of the year, most players are carrying knocks and it's something your body simply gets used to."

doctors who know the game and know the risk of going onto the field. If it means I have to play with an injection to get through it and there's no further implications then you do it.

We play a tough sport and every game is going to be a risk whether you are injury free or not.

A large part of why players take to the field with injuries is because they don't want to let their team mates down. Clubs

WALMSLEY

occupational hazard that players are happy to deal with



don't have the luxury of 40 man squads and sometimes a team has so many injuries that they can be struggling to field a full side, and nobody wants to leave the team or the club in that position.

Additionally, and importantly, players also take to the field because they want to be part of the big occasions. Nobody wants to slog through the season playing all the matches and then miss out on the big occasions, like the Challenge Cup Final or the play-offs.

This season I experienced that situation. I was playing with the shoulder injury for some time. It required surgery and I knew that, but I didn't want to miss out on the play-offs or the chase to make them.

I did my ankle two weeks before the play-off match with Leeds. I

went up for the scan but I knew regardless of scan results, I was going to play that game. You don't go through pre-season, play 30 games and then miss out on the play-offs. I was fully aware of the situation with my ankle and in my head I would

have played unless I couldn't walk, but if the medical staff knew there was a risk of causing further damage I know they would have put a stop to it.

As it was, I didn't have surgery on that ankle.

In the end, the worst thing that could have happened by me playing in the play-offs was doing the same injury, so there was no additional risk. I knew I'd have to have the operation on my shoulder in the off-season so if I needed to have my ankle done too then so be it.

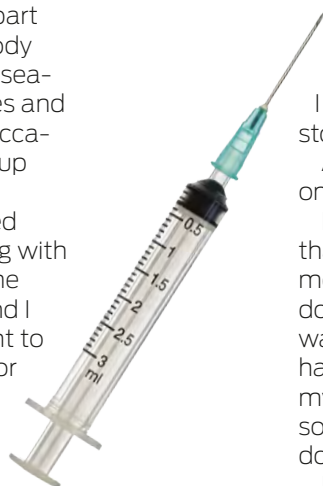
I know that many people are

concerned about the long-term wellbeing of players, but that is exactly why clubs like St Helens pay the big bucks to the medical staff and also the coaches. They know how to manage us as players. The medical staff know the best treatments and how to address every type of injury, while the coaches know if we need a rest and work their plans around us.

At the end of the day, as Rugby League players we play to win things. You don't play an entire season to miss out on the final.

If it means putting your body on the line more than usual then it's something for me personally that is worth doing, but the coaches and the medical staff know us and will never put us in a position of high risk.

They have our best interests at heart. **RLW**



What do you want to see Alex write about in future? Send your ideas and comments to alex.walmsley@totalrl.com

Jamie Peacock believes he might have discovered the key to winning Super League's coveted treble, just as he swaps his training kit for a suit and tie.

Peacock is one of a select group of men that have twice completed the clean sweep of domestic trophies in this country, having added to his 2003 haul at Bradford with this year's memorable Leeds Rhinos triumph.

Leon Pryce, Lee Gilmour and Paul Anderson are the three others, winning the treble with the Bulls and then again at St Helens three years later.

There are some ingredients that are required to achieve the triple strike of Challenge Cup, League Leaders Shield and Grand Final winners. Consistency is one, luck is widely accepted to be another, along with strength in depth.

But Peacock believes that an additional cause played a crucial part in both of his treble triumphs.

"Both times I've won the treble we've had moments where we've rode our luck," he told **RLW**.

"In 2003 the Challenge Cup final against Leeds could easily have ended as a draw.

"But the other thing that I can draw similarities from, is that in 2003 James Lowes was retiring, like the guys at Leeds this year.

"Perhaps that emotional will to win gives you an edge over other players — I can clearly remember wanting to win for Jimmy.

"I can't speak for other players, but there were similar statements this year after the Grand Final, and Danny McGuire said to me that there was no way he was losing for us out there.

"I think perhaps that's the edge that you need to do the treble.

"Both of the sides that I was involved with rode our luck, and maybe you need a cause above and beyond just winning »



Triple Treble

Last month, Leeds Rhinos became only the third team to complete a trophy clean sweep in the Super League era, joining St Helens and Bradford Bulls. But who had the strongest team and the toughest task?

WORDS GARETH WALKER PHOTOGRAPHY SWPIX.com, RLW ARCHIVE



Head over to www.totalrl.com/treble to see one writer's dream composite lineup from the three teams

JAMIE PEACOCK 288

a trophy. Having a cause like that can unite a team, and it becomes bigger than winning the competition itself — I think that was the key to winning the treble in the teams I played in.”

That trend is evident in St Helens’ class of 2006, who, statistically at least, have the best record of the three treble winners, losing just four matches all season and all by four points or less. Prop Paul Anderson retired after the Grand Final that year while key man Jamie Lyon headed back to Australia.

But Saints’ leading performer that year, Man of Steel Paul Wellens, believes there was another key factor for that particular team — overwhelming confidence. Speaking in Mike Critchley’s excellent book “As Good As It Gets”, which pays tribute to that dominant 2006 Saints side, Wellens explained how the players that year believed that they were better than everyone else.

It wasn’t a markedly different team to 2005, when St Helens were expected to compete for silverware only to twice fall short in semi-finals. But the side the following season had a different aura about it.

“The difference between the two years personally was a sense of determination but also a sense of confidence that nearly bordered on arrogance in a way. We knew we were very good. We only had to look around the dressing room at the people sat around — and look at the people who could not get in the team, good men like Nick Fozzard and Vinnie Anderson, and that gave an indication of how good we were. You looked about the dressing room and see Jamie Lyon — confident player, Longy (Sean Long), Leon (Pryce), Keiron (Cunningham), myself at the time — all really confident players in key positions and playing well.”

Wellens also echoed Peacock’s sentiment that good fortune also plays its part.

“What we did as a club was get lucky. We signed



Paul Anderson so everyone thought, ‘What are we signing him for, he’s hardly playing for Bradford?’ and yet he was phenomenal for two years. Saints used him in the right way and got great value from him.

“Robes (James Roby) and James Graham, who were probably on a pittance at the time, performed like seasoned internationals. We shifted Leon to six and he became the best stand-off in the competition.

“It seemed that every bit of business we did at the time came to fruition. We got lucky in that respect.”

Peacock’s memories of playing against the 2006 Saints focus around both Anderson and the upcoming pair of Roby and Graham.

“The main thing I remember of that St Helens team is when they hammered Leeds at Knowsley Road,” Peacock said.

“That was one of my most embarrassing games in Rugby League — they put 50 on us and

“We had a sense of determination but also a sense of confidence that nearly bordered on arrogance in a way. We knew we were very good.”

it was the game that big Paul Anderson kicked a goal off the touchline. Their team that year was pretty close to unstoppable, and when you speak to people like Leon he will say that’s the best side he’s played in. From the outside looking in, you could see just from the players they left out of their Grand Final team how good their squad was — they were nearly all internationals.

“They also had two people who have gone onto become great players in James Graham and James Roby, who at that stage of their careers were probably playing for peanuts.



"They had that benefit of having two players who went onto be world class and are still class now giving them added value in their squad."

Comparing the three treble winning sides has almost endless variables of course, even for someone who has won two like Peacock.

But as he begins his new role as football manager at Hull Kingston Rovers, he allows himself a brief reflection.

"The 2003 treble was incredibly difficult, but we did have a few things stacked in our favour in that year," he said.

"One was the fact the Challenge Cup was held earlier in the season. We had a bit of a drop after that and lost three games out of five. But with the Cup out of the way, we could gather ourselves and regroup ahead of attacking the play-offs. The other factor in 2003 was that there were only perhaps two or three teams other than ourselves where you had

to be at a nine or 10 to have a chance of beating them. There were a lot of teams where you could be five or six out of 10 and still beat them.

"This year at Leeds, the way the season was structured made everything stacked against winning the treble.

"We've all seen the fairytale endings we had at the end of the season, and what that does is indicate how hard it is to win a treble. The fact that we had to come up with something after the hooter to win the League Leaders at Huddersfield, and then dig ourselves out of trouble against both St Helens and Wigan in the Grand Final.

"It was only three or four weeks down the line that I think I realised the enormity of what we'd done and achieved.

"I think we've probably carved our names alongside the great Leeds teams of the 60s and 70s in the city, and it was a good way to end what has been a golden decade for the club." 

SUPER LEAGUE TREBLE WINNERS THE KEY FACTS

BRADFORD BULLS 2003

TOTAL MATCHES 35

WINS 29 (83%) **LOSSES** 6 (17%)

TOP TRY SCORER Lesley Vainikolo (28)

TOP POINTS SCORER Paul Deacon (389)

AWARD WINNERS Man of Steel — Jamie Peacock; RLWA Player of the Year — Jamie Peacock; Harry Sunderland Trophy — Stuart Reardon

TREBLE STUMBLE A 35-0 home defeat to St Helens in June — their second in a row — left them briefly off the pace at the top

DEFINING MOMENT Paul Deacon's drop goal two minutes from the end of the home league win over Leeds in September sealed top spot

THE BEST TREBLE BECAUSE? It was the first! No team had won the Grand Final and Challenge Cup double before this, never mind the clean sweep.

ST HELENS 2006

TOTAL MATCHES 35

WINS 31 (89%) **LOSSES** 4 (11%)

TOP TRY SCORER Ade Gardner (31)

TOP POINTS SCORER Jamie Lyon (416)

AWARD WINNERS Man of Steel — Paul Wellens; Super League Young Player of the Year — James Graham; RLWA Player of the Year — Paul Wellens; Lance Todd Trophy — Sean Long; Harry Sunderland Trophy — Paul Wellens

TREBLE STUMBLE Back-to-back, narrow defeats to Hull and Bradford in June saw them wobble, but they never surrendered top spot

DEFINING MOMENT Leon Pryce's try 63 seconds before the half-time hooter gave Saints control in the Grand Final against Hull FC

THE BEST TREBLE BECAUSE? The four matches Saints lost over the course of the season were all by fewer than four points

LEEDS RHINOS 2015

TOTAL MATCHES 36

WINS 26 (72%) **LOSSES** 9 (25%)

TOP TRY SCORER Ryan Hall (22)

TOP POINTS SCORER Kevin Sinfield (289)

AWARD WINNERS Man of Steel — Zak Hardaker; Lance Todd Trophy — Tom Briscoe; Harry Sunderland — Danny McGuire; Coach of the Year — Brian McDermott; RLWA Player of the Year — Adam Cuthbertson

TREBLE STUMBLE Three consecutive defeats in the aftermath of their Challenge Cup win raised memories of their 2014 late-season collapse

DEFINING MOMENT It wouldn't have been possible had Ryan Hall not raced away to score after the final hooter in the last league game at Huddersfield

THE BEST TREBLE BECAUSE? In the closest Super League season yet, the Rhinos emerged victorious to write fairytale endings for Jamie Peacock, Kevin Sinfield and Kylie Leuluai



EORL

It was a case of so near yet so far again for Huddersfield



While it was another season full of positives for Huddersfield Giants this year, we had yet another disappointing showing in the play-offs.

Our start wasn't too good, but our performances improved as the season went on.

I was impressed with our consistency and professionalism throughout the year.

We did the right things.

But we were very negative on ourselves. We changed things a lot, probably too often.

We had quite a bit of chopping and changing and it was quite difficult to work out what our best team was and our best style of play.

Towards the back end of the season our style of play changed again and we got found out. We never really felt comfortable. We never found a way to play that we wanted to, and that's down to everyone.

The only time we really felt comfortable is when we were throwing the ball around more, which is more enjoyable to play.

However, that style of Rugby League doesn't win you semi-final matches. I don't think you can win games like that. We were left bitterly disappointed with the play-off defeat and it was yet again a case of us not being able to go the distance.

In the semi-finals more emphasis has to be on the forwards. You've got to grind it out and play the percentages better. You've got to adapt your games for the semi-final and we just didn't do that.

We only played Wigan a few weeks before the semi-final match, and they figured us out really quick. We dropped so much ball out wide and they did the basics perfectly. But that's what you'd expect. Leeds do it every year. They play off the cuff rugby all year, and then when they get to semis they change

it a little bit. They'll put the ball in the corner, chase it and then run hard with their forwards, and if there's an offload they'll throw it.

They grind teams down and then they expect the opposition to make mistakes. That's exactly what Wigan did to us.

We didn't perform in the play-offs again, but we're learning every year about ourselves as individuals and as a team.

At the Giants we perhaps put all our eggs in one basket.

We played the strongest team possible every single week, and that's hard. There were players that played every single game, but if you want them to remain on top every single game then they need a break. That could be a factor as to why we didn't perform at the end.

That's the difference between us and the teams right at the top. We're right up there, but Leeds, Wigan and St Helens have that strength and quality

CRABTREE

— and I'm tired of it. Here's how I think we can get over the line



“Simply put, we can't carry on the way we are doing, because we're letting ourselves, the fans and [chairman] Ken Davy down.”

in depth that we need. When they lose players through injury it isn't as big an issue for them, and it allows them to maintain their performance.

But now it is all about next year. It's time to strengthen the depth and quality of our squad and do everything we can to try and make sure we can go one step further next year.

I'm sad to see some of the players leaving that are moving on as I felt they could add something. But the players that are coming in will strengthen us



again. It's important that we improve in certain areas and apply ourselves in the right way for 2016. Simply put, we can't carry on the way we are doing, because we're letting ourselves, the fans and [chairman] Ken Davy down.

However, when you consider where this club has come from, I think we can be proud of what we have achieved.

Coming up through the lower leagues, we've now finished, first, third and third in the last three years.

It's a massive improvement.

We are doing a lot of things right at the club. That's what has impressed me over the last five years, the club is becoming more professional.

Now we need to figure out how to take the next step.

We have to take another step forward, but it has proved to be pretty difficult, but we know where we can improve.

As a team, we have to be more intense for longer. This year, we've made mistakes at key times and when we're in an arm wrestle we switch off for a split second. A prime example is the game against Leeds and the last minute of the season. We switched off for a second, they went and won the league.

That's the difference between champion teams and us. We've got the players, we've got the ability and our work ethic is good. We just need to find ourselves, we cannot afford to keep switching off in the big, intense games. That is where we let ourselves down and it allowed Wigan to exploit us.

With the arrivals of Ryan Hinchcliffe and Sam Rapira next season we have a better chance. Especially Hinchcliffe. He's been killing it over in the NRL and has been talked about really highly.

If we can improve again, who knows what we could achieve. **RLW**

Lights, Camera, INACTION

As dissenting voices grow louder, we ask: has the video referee outstayed its welcome?

There was a strange occurrence at Headingley for Leeds' recent hosting of the touring New Zealanders.

It had a big match feel in front of a near-capacity crowd and the action was fast and furious, with the Kiwis gradually finding their feet to run out comfortable winners over the gallant but under-strength Super League champions.

Nothing unusual there then but what was different — and particularly refreshing — was referee Richard Silverwood's ability to melt into the background to allow the two sets of players to become the exclusive focus of attention for the packed terraces.

Because the game was not due to be televised — Premier Sports stepped in at the last-minute with a skeleton crew — there were no video officials and it was like a breath of fresh air and a throwback to the old days when the referee made instant decisions which were accepted without fuss or favour.

As a result, although the game kicked off 12 minutes later

than the scheduled 8pm start due to the lengthy pre-match presentations, it actually finished at around the usual time of 9.50pm and everyone went home happy, having witnessed a free-flowing encounter free from controversy, with the only talking points being the breath-taking action from the players.

It was enough to make Tony Smith cry with joy, or it would have been had the Warrington head coach not been on holiday at the time.

Smith, of course, is the most outspoken critic of the video referee, which is as old as Super League itself but appears to have reached a peak in unpopularity.

"I've had some really good debates with people within the game who say we've got the technology now and we can't turn back," Smith says.

"Well I disagree.

"I'd much prefer in-goal touchjudges and referees to make the decisions which have to be accepted

by everybody, whether you're in the crowd, whether you're a commentator or whether you're a coach or a player.

"I'd much prefer we accept what is given on the pitch, which is what ultimately sport is about."

Of course, not even the former Leeds, Huddersfield and England coach believes the video referee will be ditched any time soon but he senses a groundswell of opinion calling for reform.

Stuart Cummins, the former RFL controller of referees who now works as an analyst for Sky Sports during their live coverage of Super League fixtures, reckons the game has gone too far on the technical side.

"We should go back to the original reason the video referee was introduced, which was to decide on issues of grounding in the in-goal area, and include two other situations that are difficult for the officials — onside from a kick that leads to a try and challenges in the air," »





ARE VIDEO REFEREE DECISIONS
SLOWING DOWN THE GAME?

Cummins argues.

Smith confesses he may have actually made the situation worse with his constant criticism of the video referee but maintains his belief that the system has become too time-consuming.

"I don't think we're going to throw it out," he says.

"I think the video ref is here to stay in some form or fashion but I think we have to re-vamp it. It's argued in debates that the video ref is used in so many other sports now but it is often restricted in other sports. In tennis and cricket they are limited to so many challenges, in the NFL it's unlimited but most things in the NFL are looked at and that is a stop-start sport anyway.

"I think we sell our sport as action-packed with not many stoppages. One of the big ticks in the box for us is that the ball is in play for so long.

"I know they call time off for the video ref but it just changes the whole flow of action for fans. Once upon a time there was a bit of suspension in it but now the time it takes to reach a decision is frustrating for players, coaches and people watching. I'm not really bothered about whether they get it right or wrong, it's the amount of time that it takes to get to a decision. My other argument is that, because they put pressure on the video refs, they look at it so many times and because people like me have complained about it, they spend so much time trying to get it right. Well I still don't know if they're getting any better at it.

"I would also say there are other decisions in the game that we have to abide by.

"If they decide to penalise somebody for pulling the ball out in the ruck when it's actually just a drop, it can change the whole outcome of a game, just as a video ref disallowing a try can. For me, it's really about the flow and momentum and the time that it takes. There are a lot of people that are growing



ENGLAND'S JAMES GRAHAM WAS DENIED A TRY IN THE SECOND BASKERVILLE SHIELD TEST BY THE VIDEO REFEREES

a little bit tired of it.

"If we can come up with a way of limiting it, that would be a positive move."

The Australians believe they have come up with a plan to quell the growing disquiet in the NRL, with the implementation of a central command centre — already dubbed "the bunker" — for 2016 which promises to halve the time taken to review a decision and deliver more accurate results.

The Australian Rugby League Commission's head of football Todd Greenberg says the centre, which will be a first for Australian sport and be based at the Australian Technology Park in Sydney, will use Hawk-Eye Innovations video review technology and be supported by Telstra's digital video network platform.

"We have been through an exhaustive trial process because this is so important for our fans," Greenberg says.

"Now that it has been

"I've had some really good debates with people within the game who say we've got the technology now and we can't turn back. Well I disagree."

— TONY SMITH





The jury is still out following the year-long trial which was brought into sharp focus in the Grand Final when referee Ben Thaler's decision to award a try following a suspicion of a Danny McGuire knock-on proved crucial. Had he made a negative call before passing it on, would Wigan have been crowned champions?

Smith is actually in favour of the new ruling which he argues forces referees to be more pro-active.

"There was a circumstance a couple of years ago, when one particular ref made sure he was a long distance away from a try-scoring opportunity and I think it was so he could hand it upstairs for somebody else to make the decision," Smith says.

"They prefer somebody else to be wrong. At least by having this rule, it has helped them try to get into a position to try to make a call."

Cricket and tennis have extended the use of technology to give their players the opportunity to challenge the decisions of the officials and Cummins believes its introduction into Rugby League would prevent a repeat of the pivotal moment in one of the Rugby Union World Cup quarter-finals when referee Craig Joubert incorrectly awarded what proved to be the match-winning penalty.

Cummins says the captain's challenge would add a new dimension to Super League and Smith believes it would be worth a closer look, as long as it was kept within reason.

"Yeah, give the captain of each team a chance to challenge a try or no try in each half," Smith says.

"That would limit it to four a game, unless they were right. I'd go along with that. If you don't use the challenge in the first half, you've still only got one in the second half, though.

"I'd try to keep it to as few as possible, although you could still end up having six, seven or eight decisions that go upstairs if they keep getting them right." **RLU**

approved by the Commission, we will begin work on the facility so it is up and running in time for the start of the 2016 season.

"Our video referees will be using state-of-the-art technology. We will control the vision and the improved technology, which means we will be able to make informed decisions much quicker. Our video referees will have access to multiple camera angles and playback control for all reviewable decisions.

Touch screen interfaces, zoom functions and split screens will further enhance the decision-making process. Recent trials have shown that video referees can review decisions in an average of about 40 seconds when they have relevant angles and enhanced video review technology available at their fingertips.

"That's half the current average time our video referees take to make a decision – and that will be our target next season."

Smith will watch the innovation with interest but

CONTROVERSIAL CALLS

HULL FC v HULL KR MAGIC WEEKEND 2013

If the hostility wasn't fierce enough, Steve Ganson almost started a riot when he awarded the Airlie Birds a try, despite Chris Green being blatantly offside from a kick forward. Hull FC went on to win the match 22-16. Rovers chairman Neil Hudgell described the call as "the single worst decision in the last 10 years of Rugby League." Ganson was dropped from his duties the week after.

BRADFORD v ST HELENS 1999 SL GRAND FINAL

Widely regarded as one of the toughest video referee decisions of all time. Dave Campbell spent an eternity deliberating whether Bradford's Michael Withers had grounded the ball with his fingertips after Leon Pryce's break. In the end, he awarded a knock-on. St Helens would win the match 8-6

remains sceptical about Rugby League's ability to overcome the difficulties.

"I think the NFL did that at one stage," he says.

"All referrals went to a central point and they tried to get some experts but then they ended up referring it back to the on-field referees. I've got to say the NFL is used to stoppages but they don't get a whole lot wrong on the field because they've got a lot of specialised referees who are well trained and they've got enough people in the right sort of positions to make sure they get it right. They do it precisely.

"We haven't come up with a system that is able to do that. We just have the one referee on the park and we have got to accept his frailties because he's only got one set of eyes."

The RFL will be monitoring the bunker after copying the Australian system of forcing referees to make calls on tries before handing the final decision over to two video officials.

W

hen you're down on your luck, sometimes all you need is a chance moment to get you back on track.

Ben Crooks found himself questioning whether he had a future in Rugby League during 2014 and then, after being handed a lifeline by NRL club Parramatta Eels, was left frustrated by injuries and factors out of his control.

The talented centre, a Super League Dream Team representative just two years ago, was due a bit of good fortune and got it with a little help from his dad, Castleford legend Lee Crooks.

Ben signed for his hometown club on a three-year deal in June and he told **RLW** the story of how the move came about.

"It was quite a weird one actually," he recalled.

"My dad rang me one afternoon and he goes, 'I've just been down to the Cas game and bumped into Daryl Powell'. He said to my dad that he'd seen I hadn't been getting played and making the strides I wanted to make, and that if ever I wanted to come back early they'd really like to have me.

"He said I'd fit into their structures and that he really liked how I played.

"I just thought, 'That's nice. At least it's a little bit of an avenue if something goes wrong'.

"I think a month had passed and I'd had a chat with the Parramatta head coach (Brad Arthur) and [assistant] Peter Gentle about the chances of me playing.

"Obviously with the problems they had with the salary cap on top of everything, it looked highly unlikely that I'd be able to get a start.

"I had a chat with my manager and said, 'Right, what are the options we've got?'.

"We had a few options but the one that stuck out the most was Castleford, just because I'd had the head coach personally asking for me — as a young lad it's very rare that happens.

"That's basically how it came about — it all started with a conversation Daryl had with my dad."

It's clear how much respect Crooks junior has for Powell, a coach who has taken Castleford from the bottom of Super League to being serious



WORDS JAMES O'BRIEN PHOTOGRAPHY MAGI HAROUN, SWPIX.COM

STAY CLASSY

Ben Crooks is back from an unfulfilling stint Down Under and is aiming to get his career back on track with hometown club Castleford



contenders for honours. Powell has not only got the Tigers winning regularly but playing with style and swagger, leaving supporters in no doubt that 'Classy Cas' are back.

"Daryl was the main reason for joining Cas because I knew he'd be able to get the best rugby out of me," Crooks said with typical enthusiasm.

"I'm a young and energetic kid who likes to run around and have the ball in my hands.

"That's exactly the sort of player Daryl wants — he wants a load of energy and enthusiasm, to throw the ball around if you can and play what you see, which is very much how I like to play.

"It suits my game perfectly and he's given me his full backing to do well.

"He's trusting that I can fit into their structure very well so it's something I'm really looking forward to.

"I really do genuinely believe that we can challenge for silverware."

Getting the chance to play for Castleford is a dream come true for Crooks, who is already counting down the days to his first appearance at the Mend-A-Hose Jungle as a Tiger.

"I was always a Cas fan growing up as a young kid and used to stand in the corner of the stand next to the burger van," Crooks reflected.

"You can ask players from all different clubs what it's like to play at Cas and everybody enjoys playing there because it's an old-fashioned style of crowd.

"You're not in a big 30,000-seater stadium where it's half full — everybody's packed in and the crowd's right on top of you which is great as a player because you can feel the energy and passion coming from the fans and that feeds on to the players.

"Cas as a place to play is absolutely brilliant and I've always loved playing there.

"I'm really excited to run out there as a Cas player."

There will inevitably be comparisons with his dad, who also began his career at Hull before moving to Australia and eventually representing Castleford with distinction.

"It's something I've grown up with — everyone's linked me back to my dad ever since I started as a kid when I was five," Ben explained.

"It bothered me a little bit when I was younger but I'm growing up now

and it doesn't bother me at all.

"At the end of the day, if I'm half the player my dad was and did half the things he did in his career, then I'll be very happy.

"He accomplished a hell of a lot but I'm a completely different player and person and want to make my own imprint on the game.

"Hopefully one day my son will be saying, 'My dad did this...'"

The move to the Tigers represents a chance for Crooks to get his career back on track after two disappointing years.

He lost his confidence and form in a Hull FC shirt in 2014 — which saw him sent to Championship club Doncaster on dual registration — and failed to make an appearance for Parramatta this season, something that soured his experience Down Under.

"It was really upsetting, to be honest with you," said the 22-year-old, who instead played for Wentworthville Magpies in the New South Wales Cup.

"I went over there for one reason and that was to play NRL.

"I had a bit of strife with injury, which upset me more than anything.

"Then about three months into the season I got told I couldn't play due to salary cap laws and rules.

"I think that's what upset me the most — the fact it wasn't my playing ability or how I was playing that stopped me from making that jump, it was contributing factors that were out of my control.

"There was nothing I could do and it was just something I had to get on with."

But despite that disappointment, the move to Australia may well have saved his career.

"When I left in 2014 I wasn't playing my best rugby and wasn't all there mentally — I'd lost all my confidence and was down on myself," Crooks said.

"To be honest with you, by the end of the season I was wondering whether this was the career I wanted and if I wanted to carry on down this path.

"But the opportunity arose to go over there and I managed to regain my confidence.

"I'm really looking forward to next year getting under way and proving what I can do again." 



On a dim, drizzly November afternoon, Scott Naylor answers his phone. "Just give me 20 seconds," he tells me. "I'm locking up."

The Oldham coach owns a small coffee shop in Allerton, a small yet busy suburb of Liverpool. It's his way of making a living outside of Rugby League.

"When I left Salford as a coach back in 2008 I realised I wasn't qualified to do anything," explained Naylor.

"I spent a bit of time on building sites, doing the jobs nobody else wanted to do. It was all I could do really.

"All I ever did was Rugby League. When everything went professional the plans weren't in place to go to college or anything like that, it was just all about Rugby League since I left school."

As a player, Naylor enjoyed an impressive career. One of the unsung members of the great Bradford team of the early noughties, he won two Challenge Cups, the Grand Final and the World Club Challenge with the Bulls. He also represented England on four occasions.

His transition away from Rugby League was a difficult one.

However his career prospects both in and outside of the game are now flourishing, following Oldham's recent promotion to the Championship.

"I opened the business in the middle of pre-season," Naylor told **RLW**.

"I spent all this year coaching Oldham and trying to get a new business up and running. I was working all hours and I was a tired man come August, but it was all worthwhile in the end.

"It's nice to get a bit of reward. We all worked hard with Oldham and I worked hard with the business, so it's good to see the rewards in both departments."

Naylor's biggest challenge is ahead of him. After years of gut-wrenching misses in the play-offs, the Roughyeds finally achieved the promotion they craved, defeating Keighley in the League 1 Promotion Final to secure their status in the second tier in 2016.

Oldham will swap trips to South Wales and Oxford for the bright lights of Bradford and Leigh, which will surely present a monumental challenge for a team used to playing fellow part-timers only.

"We can't wait," said Naylor.

"It's a challenge for me. I'm coming up against a better quality of coach, my assistant is coming up against a better quality assistant and our conditioner is

up against better conditioners.

"It's a completely different level for all of us. You saw the difference between the north and south teams in League 1 this year, but the gap between Championship and League 1 is even bigger than that.

"It's a tough task and we're in a completely different scenario. The team has been used to winning games and being in the mix at the top for the last three years, but next season is a totally different challenge. Every week will be massively intense, we're going to some legendary clubs with amazing histories, just like Oldham."

Indeed, Oldham's illustrious past earns them the status of one

of the sport's sleeping giants. They dominated Rugby League at the start of the 20th century and were one of the major forces of the fifties and sixties before a gruesome fall from grace.

A return to the Championship is part of a long process in place at the club, and Naylor is desperate to see further progression.

"Everything about the place has to improve year on year," he said.

"If that's what we manage to do then there's no reason why Oldham can't become the club that once was.

"It's a long hard battle, we all know that, but it would be boring if it wasn't, would it?"

For the upward trajectory of the club to continue, Naylor must mastermind a survival plan for Oldham as they take on a number of full-time opponents.

"As a club we're confident, as coaching staff we're confident," Naylor insisted.

"The big question is, are the



EDIT

Scott Naylor enjoyed a glittering career as a player with Bradford. Now as a coach he is aiming to bring the glory days back to Oldham

WORDS MATTHEW SHAW PHOTOGRAPHY SWPIX.com, OLDHAM RLFC

players confident? They have to have the belief that everything will be OK.

"I do genuinely think they will believe in themselves. Some of the stuff we played last year was very mature and it was Championship level at times. The game we played against Keighley to get promotion was probably the best we've performed since I took over, but we need to play at that level, at least, every week. That's the task in front of us.

"We're under no illusions just how difficult it is going to be, but we're giving the players all of this information so that nothing is a shock to them once we get underway.

"We've improved the squad. The players we have signed are Championship players and we've got a few lads in our existing squad that have played at this level. Add the dual-registration with Huddersfield and loan players when we need them, hopefully that can get us across the line."

Promotion gives Naylor a chance to pit his wits against a number of new coaches, including old teammate James Lowes at his old Odsal stomping ground.

He can't wait to make his return to a place with so many happy memories.

"You've got to give your life to Rugby League to get anything out of it whatsoever," said Naylor.

"So to get a couple of Grand Finals, Challenge Cups and a World Club Challenge is great, and I played for my country on the back of that success.

"It gives me something to show for 20 years of blood, sweat and tears.

"I'm an old man now, but I'm still a Challenge Cup winner, still a Grand Final winner and nobody can take that away from me."

Yet, despite enjoying a playing career many would sacrifice anything for, his true affection for the game lies elsewhere.

"I love coaching," admitted Naylor.

"Playing was fun, but I get something out of coaching that playing didn't give me. As a coach I'm relatively young and inexperienced, but I'm confident in my own ability and so far I think everything is going OK.

"I'm loving every minute at Oldham and I'm learning all the time." **RLW**



THREE OLDHAM STARS TO KEEP AN EYE ON

A long-term target of Naylor's, **Danny Grimshaw** finally joined the Roughyeds ahead of 2016 after leaving Hunslet. A strong and deceptively talented player with the ball in hand, Grimshaw injects some much-needed Championship experience into a young side.

After an unsuccessful spell at Whitehaven, **Richard Lapore** returned to Oldham and produced some of his best Rugby League at the back end of last season. A scheming playmaker, he will have a big say in matters.

After taking a year-long hiatus from the game, Oldham lured **Will Hope** back to Rugby League towards the close of the season. By the end of November, he had been awarded man of the match in Ireland's European Championship victory over France. His talent is undoubted, and Scott Naylor is looking forward to unleashing him on the Championship.

→ After the snorefest that doubled as the Second Test in London, maybe it's time to rethink our approach to tinkering with the rules of Rugby League.

Instead of asking ourselves how we can make our game more exciting, maybe we really need to look at how we can make it less boring.

The NRL is our peak club competition and many of the rule changes and interpretation adjustments come from that part of the world.

But the NRL has supreme athletes who can rise above the mundanity of a pre-programmed style of play to entertain us. Without them, we just get the pre-programmed style of play.

I am not trying to be disrespectful to the Kiwis who took the field at Stratford when I say it may have actually been possible to fit them into an NRL team salary cap.

Without Waerea-Hargreaves, Foran, Johnson, Mannering and Vatuvei they lacked the sort of players I spoke about — those who can rise above sheer athleticism with their skill and flair.

Should we be tailoring our whole sport for these few players who transcend what can often be monotony?

Or should we be making games that do not boast these stars better to watch, and leave the NRL to do what it wants?

Should we be rewarding tries scored through the hands by awarding bonus points according to the number of passes in the movement?

God forbid, should we ban hit-ups or drives in junior matches?

At the start of the series, Steve McNamara said England and New Zealand would play with more flair than an NRL game.

Clearly, that only applies when the series is not on the line.

To see them both play like Australian club teams, minus the superstars, was very disappointing indeed.



WORDS STEVE MASCORD PHOTOGRAPHY SWPIX.COM

Change The Programme

GET WELL, GARY

Of course events on the field in London paled in comparison to the shock we all felt regarding the attack on our colleague Gary Carter on November 6.

I was not aware of what had happened until I arrived at the Olympic Stadium on match eve for the respective captain's runs.

Gary was supposed to be there. The Press Association's Ian Laybourn broke the news to me and it was hours before I could properly process it.

In these situations you always read about what a nice person someone is but Gary is possibly the most

generous man in our trade on either side of the world. I have lost count of the number of times he has dropped me at my hotel after matches, going miles out of his way.

Before I did my most recent NRL 360 appearance, I called him for some background and he ended up giving me about three stories!

In some ways it's still difficult to process. I'm looking forward to visiting him now the series is over and I've got some time in London.

I'm sure I speak for everyone reading this when I say I'd do anything necessary to help Gary and his brave wife Gemma during his recovery.



TOP NOTCH

One thing that has really stood out during the Anglo-New Zealand series has been the quality of the pre-match entertainment.

Sure, one wag had a point when he said using choirs of local schoolkids in London cost little or nothing and sold a shedload of tickets to their parents.

But the use of fireworks, marching bands, anthem singers and the mic'ing up of the haka have all been first rate. Understated and classy.

PRODIGAL'S RETURN

A few days before the third Baskerville Shield Test, England back rower Brett Ferres (*below*) sat down with a few of us for what is known in the biz as an "all-in".

No punches were thrown.

Phil Thomas of The Sun, filling in for our stricken Gaz, asked if there was a sense of a missed opportunity with the loss in London in the wake of the poor performance of the England rugby union team.

"I've no interest in rugby union," he replied, "especially after recent events."

When I pressed him if he was talking about that sport's treatment of Sam Burgess, he added: "You can read into that what you want".

I'm with Brett.

I honestly don't care who is to blame for what when Sam Burgess was playing rugby union.

I've no interest in the sport. He's a league player again now so, naturally, I'm interested in him again.

If you are too, be sure to turn to page 52 and read our analysis of the 26-year-old's roller coaster year in the 15-man code, with exclusive quotes from former team-mates and fellow code hoppers. **RLW**

MAN WITH A PLAN

We finally have a strategic plan for the game worldwide (see our interview with the RLIF's David Collier over on page 48) and, as always, the interesting stuff is in the fine print.

The document released after an RLIF meeting in Paris was big on ideas and short on detail but here's a few things that stood out to me (*both within the document and whispers around the edges*):

1 By 2025 the RLIF wants half the teams in the World Cup to be capable of making the final.

You can bet that they won't be repeating only half the teams can make the final when the 2025 tournament kicks off.

2 "Rugby World Cup Nines" appeared several times.

Are we about to fight for the use of the word "rugby"?

3 Target two G20 nations.

These must surely be the United States and South Africa, although Canada will be fighting hard to be included.

4 The new tournaments, to be known variously as Federation Cups, Intercontinental Cups, Continental Cups and Confederation Cups, are unlikely to involve Australia UNLESS they are nines.

5 Somehow, 30 more Rugby League-playing countries have appeared, including Burundi.



→ If places at the World Cup were handed to countries doing the most for Rugby League development, Lebanon would not have missed out on the last two events.

Remarkably, three draws in qualifying cost them their place in 2008 and 2013, and Lebanon could be forgiven for feeling very hard done by. After all, they have a local competition, student game, representative sides and compete in tournaments around the region. All of this against a backdrop of terrorism and war. Like Serbia, Jamaica and Canada, their domestic efforts are worthy of reward.

Thankfully, Lebanon have finally got it. After a comfortable 90-28 aggregate win over hosts South Africa, the Cedars will be heading Down Under in 2017, a return to the world stage for the first time since a group of Australian Lebanese had a very mixed experience in Wales (and Gloucester) in 2000.

Over the intervening years they have established a domestic competition that has brought through some talented players. The vast majority of Lebanon's team play in Australia's second and third tiers, with a sprinkling of NRL magic – Melbourne Storm winger Travis Robinson scored a hat-trick in the second leg and Canterbury Bulldog Ali Aliouche led them at hooker – and homegrown duo Robin Hachache from Beirut club Immortals and Gray Wolves RLFC founder Wael Harb. Their presence demonstrates Lebanon RL's longevity: Harb

“To see what Lebanon has gone through in the last few years, to achieve this for the country is fantastic. I am proud to have played and won for my brothers, family and country.”



CEDARS TAKE ROOT

Lebanon have qualified for the 2017 World Cup, but they're not content with making the numbers up...

first played for the Cedars in 2007 while the Immortals were founded at Lebanon American University way back in 2002, their first coach being current RLEF general manager Danny Kazandjian. Lebanon find themselves in the same situation now as the USA, Italy, Scotland, Ireland and the Cook Islands did at the 2013 World Cup: a national team of overseas-based heritage players has taken them to the promised land with only a couple of locals involved. Whether they should stick or twist was far from the players' minds in South Africa. Several were interviewed in Arabic after the game for Lebanese TV and can be seen on Youtube.

"This is the best day of my life," said captain Chris Saab.

"I hope every Lebanese person, as well as past and present players, have something to smile about."

Another star in South Africa was half-back James Boustani, who plays for Hills District in New South Wales. "It's an

amazing feeling," he said.

"To see what Lebanon has gone through in the last few years, to achieve this for the country is fantastic. I am proud to have played and won for my brothers, family and country."

Lebanon certainly benefited from moving to the new Middle-East Africa zone, rather than having to battle past the likes of Wales and Ireland in the European zone. That does highlight the disparity between qualifying routes for RLWC2017, though. By the time the third and final European qualifier is known after the play-off at Leigh on Friday 4 November next year, it will have taken 29 games to eliminate seven European nations. Italy, Russia or Serbia could play up to nine games to qualify.

MEA only needed two games to eliminate South Africa and send Lebanon through, the Pacific staged just one qualifier, as Tonga knocked out the Cooks. Expect that to change under David Collier's new RLIF direction.

LATEST RESULTS

23 October, Euro A, Galashiels

SCOTLAND 22-24 IRELAND

24 October, Test Match, Leigh

ENGLAND 84-4 FRANCE



25 October, WC Qualifier, Brakpan
SOUTH AFRICA 12-40 LEBANON

30 October, Euro A, Cardiff

WALES 14-6 FRANCE

31 October, WC Qualifier, Brakpan
SOUTH AFRICA 16-50 LEBANON

1 November, First Test, Hull

ENGLAND 26-12 NEW ZEALAND

7 November, Second Test, London

ENGLAND 26-12 NEW ZEALAND

7 November, Euro A, Bray

IRELAND 4-30 WALES

7 November, Euro A, Avignon

FRANCE 32-18 SCOTLAND

7 November, Third Test, Wigan

ENGLAND 20-14 NEW ZEALAND

FIXTURES

4 December, WC Qualifier, Jacksonville
UNITED STATES v JAMAICA

8 December, WC Qualifier, Florida

JAMAICA v CANADA

12 December, WC Qualifier, Florida

UNITED STATES v CANADA

FIELD OF DREAMS

King's Park, Kowloon, Hong Kong



Check out HKRL's
smart website at
hongkongrugbyleague.com
for more info

→ King's Park hosted the Inaugural Hong Kong Rugby League Nines in late October, won by the magnificently-named Mong Kok Creepers.

Located in Ho Man Tin, halfway between Mong Kok's spit and sawdust markets and Tsim Sha Tsui terminal, you can reach it by the world famous Star Ferry across the harbour. King's Park calls itself 'The Home of Hong Kong Rugby', with three artificial grass pitches, clubhouse, stand and floodlights, typically surrounded by high-rise flats with one side dug into a cliff. HKRL was formed this summer by chairman James Hall, who has been hosting Friday night taster sessions at Kings Park. That led to a successful Nines with four teams competing in steamy conditions. The Creepers saw off Wan Chai Warriors, Hong Kong Hunters, and Coastal Cobras to be crowned champions. Off the back of the Nines, a Hong Kong Residents XIII went to the Philippines in early November.

PLAYER OF THE MONTH

Isaac Schmidt, Norway RL

→ Norway second-rower Isaac Schmidt scored a hat-trick as they beat Sweden 30-20 in the Nordic Cup at the end of October, securing runner-up spot behind champions Denmark.

Five goals from five attempts by winger Svein Åge Breimoen also helped as Norway saw off a tiring Sweden at Bislett Stadion in northern Oslo, home of the world famous Bislett Games athletics and 1952 Olympics.

Schmidt opened the scoring early for Norway but Sweden led 16-6 at the break, and again by 20-12 with just six minutes left. But Schmidt completed his hat-trick of tries to

cut the gap to two points. Late touch-downs for replacement Cam Leslie and man of the match, loose

forward Joshua Skidmore-Hornby saw Norway triumph as Sweden fell apart in the last few minutes.

Schmidt is player-coach at Oslo Capitals, who won the championship in 2012, 2013 and 2014 and has been a part of the national team since 2011.



MISSIONARY OF THE MONTH

Timothy Buipe, PNG

→ Two years ago, Buipe left Papua New Guinea to attend Adamson University in the Philippines.

When his sponsors fell through, he had to leave university and set up a computer shop. Missing his Rugby League, he put out a notice to see if any locals wanted to learn the game. Eight weeks later, Manila Storm made their debut, only losing 34-40 to a Hong Kong Residents XIII at Southern Plains in Alabang. Captained by Al Del Castillo Tesoro, a Storm team made up of Filipino rugby union players, footballers, basketball players, martial arts experts, runners and even tennis players turned an interest in league into action. Thanks to Buipe, 27, Manila Storm travel to Legazpi at the foot of Mount Mayon to play the Albay Vulcans on 7 December. 

To satisfy your global Rugby League cravings on a daily basis log on to Totalrl.com and click on 'international news'



RYAN

It's time to have a quick glance back at the 2015 season

HIGHLIGHT OF THE YEAR

There are a few that spring to mind, but I don't think we can top winning the League Leaders' Shield. To play as well as we did throughout the regular season and only lose the one game was a massive achievement. All the Challenge Cup matches against the Super League teams were great occasions as well, but I think winning the league was the best.

LOWLIGHT OF THE YEAR

Obviously, this is our performances in the Qualifiers. For one reason or another we just didn't manage to maintain the levels of intensity we had done earlier in the year. I've thought it over several times and I honestly don't know why it happened the way it did, but it is really disappointing. Hopefully we can make amends next year.

TOUGHEST OPPONENT

There were a few, the Championship had some exceptional players last year. But I'd have to say Reni Maitua, who played for Featherstone, then Salford and is joining us ahead of next season. As a defender I really, really struggled to deal with him. He runs some exceptional lines and makes it really difficult to bring him down. He's a very clever player and he's good with his hands too. He was a player we struggled against at Leigh. We're excited to have him as part of our team for next season.

HARDEST GAME

The Challenge Cup game with Wakefield. I know we went on and won the game but it was draining both mentally and physically. It took some time to recover from.



BEST PERFORMANCE

We actually lost the match, but I think our Qualifiers game with Hull KR was a great performance. We blew them off the park in the first-half, we were on fire and they couldn't handle us. They upped it in the second-half and turned it around but I thought we played great.

MOST UNDERRATED PLAYER IN THE CHAMPIONSHIP

Gregg McNally. We have a lot of big players in our team, but Gregg is absolutely crucial in everything we do.

I think he is absolutely fantastic but he seems to go under the radar. He gets involved in everything and causes problems all over the park.

MOST OVERRATED PLAYER IN THE CHAMPIONSHIP

This could get me in serious trouble! I'm going to say Lewis Foster at Leigh. It's not because he's overrated, he just overrates himself! He thinks he should be getting in the team every week and moans all the time, so I'll go with him.

ONE THING I'VE LEARNED

I've learned a lot about myself as a player this season.

When you get to play against Super League teams and players it really does give you the chance to test yourself. I think the same can be said about all the Leigh players, while it was a disappointing end to the season we came out the other side a lot better for it.

BRIERLEY

and pick out my highs and lows, as well as a few other things



BEST YOUNG PLAYER

I really like the look of Cory Aston at Sheffield.

He has a lot of talent and looks like he has the makings of a very talented halfback.

I also think highly of Jordan Baldwinson, who was at Featherstone but now going back to Leeds.

He put in a lot of work for them and was a big part of their team.

I'll be watching both of them with interest going forward.

COACH OF THE YEAR

I'm sorry, but it had to be Paul Rowley for me.

Yes, Richard Marshall and Halifax had a terrific year.

They came from nowhere and surprised everybody.

But Paul took us to the Qualifiers, we won the league and took a Championship team to the Challenge Cup quarter-finals. I can't believe Paul didn't get it, I think it's a disgrace to be honest and it didn't sit right with me at the time at all.

2016 PREDICTIONS

I think we're in for an even tougher, more competitive season. I think Bradford and Leigh will be flying the flag at the top of the league again, but Halifax are going to come back even stronger, Sheffield will be better for going full-time and then the other clubs are going to be strong too.

Featherstone are going to be up there competing and I think Dewsbury are going to be really strong too.

You can't write off London either. It's got the makings of a great year. **RLW**

I can't believe Paul Rowley didn't get Coach of the Year. I think it's a disgrace to be honest."



ONE THING I'D CHANGE

How the season finished for us. It was just really disappointing in the end.

Other than that I'd say the structure. For the season to go down to those final seven games seems odd to me, I'm not sure if it works.

CHAMPIONSHIP PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Again, I'd go with Gregg McNally. I really believe he is that good a player.

Lee Gaskell is an absolutely outstanding player and he was brilliant all year, but Gregg played week in week out and was equally as good.

What subject would you like Ryan to tackle next? Let him know and it may end up in print! ryan.brierley@totalrl.com

LUCKY BREAK?

WORDS DAVE HADFIELD PHOTOGRAPHY SWPIX.com



→ I don't imagine for a moment that he'll care one way or the other, but my opinion of Steve McNamara improved markedly during the first Test against the Kiwis.

It's long been one of my famous theories that there are very few things a coach can do to influence his team's performance on match-day.

One of them, though, is the matter of who to have on the field at any given time.

A series of Great Britain and England coaches have struggled with the business of substitutions, more so, for some reason, than club coaches. I remember Andy Goodway, for instance, desperately trying to call off a player who had already been recuperating on the bench for several minutes. Tony Smith and David Waite are two more who I particularly remember struggling.

That's why I say credit where credit's due to Steve Mac for getting it so triumphantly right at Hull. All four of his replacements were used in a way that got the best out of them and contributed most to the team effort.

Perhaps he's fortunate in having a number of players who have the ability to make an impact off the bench, but you still have to use them right.

On the other hand, perhaps he did just get lucky.

The all-round ineptitude of the display against the Kiwis in the second

Test in London reflected well on no-one, especially the coach. I don't think there was a single player who lived up to his club form — and that's a really worrying situation.

There wasn't even anything all that special from New Zealand. Nor was there the atmosphere we associate with a big match.

All in all, a thundering great non-event. Bring on Wigan, which I'm obviously writing before — and hoping for another seismic shift.

If you wanted to illustrate a dictionary definition of the phrase 'voting with their feet', you could do a lot worse than use an aerial shot of Leigh a couple of Saturdays ago.

That was when England played France at the Sports Village in the warm-up game for the Baskerville Shield. It was so one-sided that, at half-time, plenty of people decided that they would be better entertained watching Leigh Miners against Siddal in the National Conference play-offs.

That's why, for a few minutes in mid-afternoon, the Atherleigh Bypass bore a passing resemblance to one of the clogged arteries of Calais as would-be migrants make a dash for the Channel Tunnel. Now that's what I call voting with your feet.

And, just as a footnote for anyone who thought that 8000 was a disappointing crowd, don't you think you should add the escapees who sought asylum at Twist Lane?

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→ Rugby League has lost one of its great enthusiasts with the death of Colin Welland.

Many will remember him as a versatile actor, whose credits included Z-Cars, Kes and The Blue Remembered Hills, or for his Oscar for the screenplay of Chariots of Fire.

What few obituaries will dwell upon is his intense love of our game, epitomised by his involvement in the launch of Fulham.

For several years, before the start of his health problems, he was a regular at big matches at home and abroad, often travelling with the media party and as excited as a kid with a glittering new toy.

Above all, though, he was a gifted communicator.

I remember one phrase he came up with to describe playing against Wigan in their pomp, when they would often toy with the opposition before getting serious and putting them in their place.

It was, he said, like wrestling with your dad.

'And that,' said a colleague, 'is why he has an Oscar and we don't.'

→ So Slammin' Sam Burgess didn't have 'the stomach' to make a success of himself in rugby union...

Unfortunate choice of words, eh?

A bit like saying that Mike Ford lacked the stomach for Rugby League. [LW](#)

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